

State cites Premium Coal for water quality permit violation

By Bob Fowler

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BRICEVILLE — The state on Monday issued a water quality permit violation notice to the coal company that discharged more than 1.4 million gallons of black water into the New River earlier this month.

A "pollution plume" of fine particles of coal, shale and other rocks from the discharge was seen nearly 29 miles downstream, a state official said.

Premium Coal's coal-washing plant in Anderson County's Devonia community will remain shuttered until it receives both state and federal approval to resume operations, Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation spokeswoman Meg Lockhart said.

The violation of Premium Coal's water quality discharge permit at its Baldwin Coal Preparatory Plant occurred Jan. 3, according to state environmental specialist Dave Turner.

"The discharge condition was not reported within 24 hours of knowledge," Turner wrote in his notice of violation letter to Premium Coal.

While a gray plume from the discharge was seen in the river 28.7 miles downstream, fine coal and rock particles were deposited on rocks and algae seven miles downstream, officials said.

"It's a situation that never should have happened," said Ann League, with the environmental group Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment.

She called the New River "an exceptional river" that flows into another exceptional waterway, the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River.

League said officials "really don't know exactly what happened because the company didn't self-report it."

Lockhart called the spill a water quality issue because of the sedimentation but said it's not a danger to the public, She said the nearest drinking water utility is more than 30 miles downstream in Huntsville.

Lockhart said the mishap occurred as a new, higher pipe was being installed in an impoundment pond at the coal-washing plant. The new pipe was needed because the pond was filling with coal slurry, she said.

Clean water from the top of that impoundment was supposed to be released into the river from the new pipe, but the black water was instead discharged from an older, lower pipe, Lockhart said.

She called the mishap "an operational problem."

Derrick O'Neal, chief engineer for Premium Coal at its Briceville office, declined comment Tuesday. He said he didn't know how many employees had been employed at the Devonia operation.



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