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Middle Fork River advocates are urging Gov. Pat Quinn and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to direct Dynegy to move three coal ash ponds at the old Vermilion Power Station north of Oakwood.

RURAL OAKWOOD — Middle Fork River advocates are urging Gov. Pat Quinn and the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to "do the right thing" and direct Dynegy to relocate three coal ash ponds at the old Vermilion Power Station north of Oakwood.

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If that's not done, they said it will just be a matter of time before the pond walls break and tons of the toxic sludge spill into the state's only national scenic river.

"Two of the three ash ponds are already failing and releasing harmful pollutants into the river," said Traci Barkley, a water resources scientist with Prairie Rivers Network. "And the river continues to move closer to the pits. At some point, either through a major flood or day-to-day erosion ... they will fail."

Barkley predicted the result would be similar to the Dan River disaster, created when 82,000 tons of coal ash from a Duke Energy power plant spilled into the North Carolina river last month. The clean-up cost has been estimated at \$700 million.

Barkley and more than a dozen other river advocates shared their concerns Thursday afternoon at Kickapoo State Park by a canoe takeout point on the river. The ash ponds are located in the river's flood plain, just upstream of the park and other protected land.

Dynegy closed the power station in 2011. During the 60 years it operated, coal-combustion residuals (commonly called coal ash) were deposited into impoundments (or man-made ponds) that were built with dams that butt up against the river. Overflow from the impoundments rolled into the river.

In July 2012, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency issued violation notices to Dynegy after it was discovered that two of the ash ponds were leaking contaminants into the



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Photo by: Noelle McGee/The News-Gazette
Traci Barkley, a water resources scientist with Prairie Rivers Network, points to a map that shows the location of three coal ash pits at the old Dynegy Vermilion Power Station.

groundwater. That groundwater could eventually seep into the surface water like the Middle Fork River.

Dynegy submitted a corrective action plan and an application to establish "a groundwater management zone" the following April. The plan called for closing the two older ponds by capping them with a "geosynthetic cover" and monitoring groundwater. It did not call for capping a third, which unlike the other two, was built with a clay liner barrier.

"We were asked to do some additional structural studies and make revisions to the plan," spokeswoman Katie Sullivan said, adding that revisions were submitted in November. "Once the plan is approved, the data will be used to develop the detailed engineering design for ash pond closure."

Officials with the IEPA and Illinois Department of Natural Resources are still determining whether to approve the plan or request another revision, IEPA spokeswoman Kim Biggs said.

But officials with Champaign-based Prairie Rivers Network, a nonprofit environmental advocacy organization that has been leading the push for coal ash site regulations, contends that Dynegy's plan doesn't go far enough.

They said the plan underestimates the flooding risks and pointed out that two weeks ago, water levels exceeded the high watermark Dynegy used in its most recent stability risk analysis. She also said the third pond was built over an underground mine, which is destabilizing its walls.

Barkley also said that coal ash pollutants have already contaminated groundwater, exceeding standards for boron, sulfate, iron, manganese and total dissolved solids.

"They're downplaying the risks these sites pose ... and are looking for the shortest, easiest and cheapest way to address these ash pits. They made the mess. They need to clean it up," Barkley said.

There are more than 90 aging coal ash pits in Illinois, and pollutants have been found in the groundwater near every one. IEPA officials have proposed new rules for the closure and clean-up of these sites.

But Barkley believes they fall short.

"They're not looking at the impacts to surface water and they're not looking at the stability of these ash pits," she said. "This is a poster child of where these rules fall short. It's not enough to just look at ground water contamination. This river matters. The fish in it matter. The people who use it matter. If you approve a closure plan, that doesn't take into consideration instability issues. That's a lot of investment for something that will fail in the future."

Other advocates also urged the governor to take action and help protect the river. They even offered to show him around the river, which they've paddled, fished in and enjoyed for years.

"We want it for the next generation," said Sandy Bales, of Urbana. She and her friend, Irene Bullard, and their families have worked to protect the river since the late 1960s.

"It really is a destination," said Tod Satterthwaite, co-owner of Kickapoo Landing and Outfitters, which provides recreational activities on the river and nearby ponds. "People know it's the state's only national scenic river. They come to paddle on what they know is a clean area and a protected area."

"We can't afford to have the river quality jeopardized because of a coal ash pit upstream."

A river wild

The Middle Fork River was designated Illinois' first state scenic river by Gov. Jim Thompson in 1986, and a national scenic river by U.S. Secretary of the Interior Manuel Lujan in 1989. What else makes it so special:

1. The river valley is home to 57 types of fish, mussels, turtles and salamanders; 45 different mammals; and 190 types of birds. Of this wildlife, 24 are on the state's threatened or endangered species list.
2. Most of the area along the river is forested. Three areas support plants and animals so rare that they are protected as state nature preserves.
3. There are more than 8,400 acres of public parks.

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