

Ameren offers plan for Illinois coal ash ponds
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As the owner of a fleet of aging coal-fired power plants, Ameren Corp. is no stranger to state and federal environmental regulators issuing new rules.

But the company turned the tables last week, proposing its own set of regulations in Illinois — plans that are already generating skepticism.

In a filing with the Illinois Pollution Control Board, Ameren Energy Resources proposed rules that would serve as a guide for closing 16 coal ash ponds at eight plants across the state.

The filing comes weeks after Ameren's announcement that it will exit the generating business in Illinois and transfer the rest of its active coal fleet to Dynegy.

Brian Bretsch, an Ameren spokesman, said the proposal is unrelated to the Dynegy deal. The rules were being written before the company decided to exit the generating business, he said.

And St. Louis-based Ameren isn't proposing to shut all of the ash ponds immediately. It would stagger the closures over the next dozen years to spread out the costs. The order would be determined by the risk posed at each site, with the initial round of closures to be proposed within six months of rules being adopted.

Ameren said it's proposing rules to fill a void. The company said there are currently no state or federal regulations "that appropriately address the closure of surface impoundments or ash ponds."

The health and environmental risks associated with coal waste were brought to light in December 2008 when a Tennessee coal ash impoundment ruptured, releasing more than 1 billion gallons of coal ash slurry into a river and across hundreds of acres.

The disaster prompted the EPA to establish rules that would regulate coal ash disposal on a national level for the first time. But the agency has yet to finalize either rule.

Ameren addressed the environmental impact of some of its ash ponds in the filing with the Pollution Control Board, a quasi-judicial state agency that sets environmental policy in Illinois.

"New groundwater data, while limited in scope, identifies impacts to groundwater at or near the footprint of ash pond systems at several facilities," the company said.

In fact, the Illinois EPA issued violation notices to Ameren at three plants just last summer. In the notices dated June 27, the agency said ash impoundments at the Newton, Meredosia and Coffeen plants violated state groundwater standards for pollutants, including manganese, zinc, arsenic and boron.

Environmental advocates in Illinois welcome the idea of Ameren shutting down coal ash ponds and cleaning up the sites.

But they're wary of Ameren's proposal to simply cap the ponds and allow the coal waste remain in the ground, especially in light of data that shows the greatest risk of groundwater contamination years after disposal sites are closed.

Traci Barkley, water resources scientist for Prairie Rivers Network, an environmental advocacy group, said the organization plans to participate in the public process before the Pollution Control Board and will push for rules that are protective of public health and the environment.

"Closure plans for these ponds must do more than just drain, cap and cover the ash pits," Barkley said.

Ameren's proposal is similar to a rule proposed by the company and adopted by the Pollution Control Board in 2010 to establish a process for closing an ash pond at the company's Hutsonville power plant.

The company said excavating the coal waste and disposing of it off-site would be cost-prohibitive.

Ameren said the proposal, as filed, would cost \$120 million.

Jeffrey Tomich covers energy and the environment for the Post-Dispatch. Follow him on Twitter at @jefftomich.