

An eye-witness account of the TVA Coal Sludge Spill into the Emory and Clinch Rivers,
Kingston, TN

This log of water quality sampling was created by:

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5:48 AM Donna Lisenby and Sandra Diaz departed Boone, NC for Kingston, TN.

9:39 AM Arrived Kingston, TN at volunteer headquarters for United Mountain Defense (UMD). Met John Wathen, Hurricane Creekkeeper; Matt Landon, Full Time Volunteer Staff for UMD; Bonnie Swinford, and other great volunteers for UMD.

10:30 AM Completed study of area maps and identified primary and secondary boat launch locations. Packed truck with boats and equipment.

11:43 AM John Wathen, Sandra Diaz and Donna Lisenby launched boats with water quality sampling equipment, safety gear and cameras on board. John, Sandra and Donna wore United States Coast Guard approved personal flotation devices commonly known as PFD's or life jackets. We paddled towards the gray plume of coal waste floating in the Clinch River (see Google Earth aerial map of our paddling journey at the end of this document).



Gray plume of coal waste on the Clinch River.

Approximately 1.9 miles downstream of the spill we found dead fish floating in the Emory River:



11:47 AM Received phone call from Peter White, producer of Assignment Earth, a videographer on assignment with the NY Times. He had met a local fisherman who agreed to give him a boat ride up the Emory River. He asked to meet us on the water and get videotape of us taking water samples of the Clinch and Emory Rivers for the NY Times.

12:05 PM Rendezvoused with Peter White on the Emory River :



Donna donned a remote microphone while Peter videotaped John, Sandra and Donna collecting water samples from a wide gray plume of coal waste floating in the Emory River. Peter conducted an on camera interview with Donna in which she described the massive scope and scale of the disaster.

12:15PM Collected first samples of conductivity, pH and heavy metals while being videotaped by Peter White.



12:46 pm We continued up river, where we encountered large barges in the river with cranes on them. We observed a turbidity curtain placed across a side cove of the Emory River adjacent to the coal ash collection ponds. The main stem of the Emory River had no turbidity curtains installed to contain the coal waste. The river continued to flow past, over and through tons of coal waste now located in the river. Even though there were cranes, barges, boats, bulldozers, track hoes, pick-up trucks and dump trucks with many men working at this location, at no time did we observe anyone from TVA attempting to remove the tons of coal waste from the contaminated river. Millions of cubic yards of waste remained in the river apparently untouched by any clean up effort even though the spill occurred 5 days earlier on Monday December 22, 2008. At the turbidity curtain, we observed a thick accumulation of floating coal waste so dense that it stopped the canoe and kayak. We could not paddle through it. We observed more dead fish floating in the coal waste plume.



12:58 PM John, Sandra and Donna took water samples at this location where the water appeared as very thick chocolate sludge and dead fish were found.

1:00 PM The cranes and bulldozers were observed pushing and dropping large rocks (rip rap) into the river, apparently erecting a rock dam across the main stem of the Emory river, they were not cleaning up the coal waste.



Note orange turbidity curtain across a side cove of the Emory river on the left side of the picture. Note that there is no orange turbidity curtain or floating booms on the main stem of the Emory River on the right side of the picture despite the fact that most of the coal waste is located just upriver on the right side. The coal waste is not on the left side where the turbidity was installed.



Erecting a rock dam across the main stem of the Emory River.



1:07PM We continued paddling up river by the barges with TVA employees and/or contractors observing us paddling by. No one communicated with us. Beyond the barges, we began encountering large deposits of coal waste in the river which we called the "ashburg zone."



1:21PM Encountered the area where tons of coal waste entered the Emory River.





Note thick gray coal waste slurry and solid waste contaminating vast areas of the Emory River.





1:27PM John, Donna and Sandra took water samples and a solid sample waste from the “asburg zone” of the Emory River.



1:35PM TVA Security Officer John B Neal Badge #107, yelled and motioned for us to approach his vessel about 500 feet away.

1:38PM A helicopter of unknown identity flew directly overhead.



1:47PM TVA Security Officer John B. Neal issued Donna Lisenby, John Wathen & Sandra Diaz each a TVA warning citation for “criminal trespass”, even though we never stepped foot on dry land or private property. We remained floating on waters of the United States in our boats at all times. He claimed that the Coast Guard had closed off the impacted portion of the Emory River and that he had personally been there when signs had been posted stating as much. We did not see any such signs at any point on our 2.3 mile journey on the Clinch and Emory rivers. Nor did we observe any such postings at the public boat launch.



2:10PM Escorted out of most impacted area by TVA Officer John B. Neal:



Followed by a law enforcement official in a police vehicle on land:



The unknown helicopter appeared to be following as well and made several passes over our head.

2:47 PM We arrived safely back at the dock, with samples, photos, videos and our three TVA autographed warning citations in hand.



2:48 PM Peter White was waiting for us at the public boat launch when we returned. Earlier in the day he had attempted to enter the “ashburg zone”, but was unable to do so because the motorized boat he was traveling in was not capable of navigating the shallow water. He asked for our water quality sample results, photographs and videotape of the “ashburg zone”, the most impacted areas of the Emory River. We agreed to provide them to him and the NY Times.

3:29PM Arrived back at United Mountain Defense Volunteer HQ to download pictures and videotape for later postings to the Waterkeeper Alliance listserve, Appalachian Voices Front Porch blog, Facebook and Twitter.

7:07PM Sandra and Donna leave Kingston, TN to return to Boone, NC.

11: 12 PM Sandra and Donna arrive in Boone, NC.

Google Earth aerial map of our water quality sampling journey, the white line in the river illustrates the path of our canoe and kayak:



For more information, photographs or video tape, please contact Donna Lisenby at donna@appvoices.org, 828-262-1500 at work or 704-277-6055 on her cell or Sandra Diaz at sandra@appvoices.org, 828-262-1500 at work or John Wathen at creekkeeper@hughes.net or 205-233-1680 on his cell. Water quality samples are being processed by Dr. Shea Turberty at Appalachian State University. Appalachian Voices will post the sample results as soon as we receive them from Dr. Turberty's environmental toxicology lab.