

The Tennessee Valley Authority manipulated science methods to downplay water contamination caused by a massive coal ash disaster, according to independent technical experts and critics of the federally funded electrical company.

The TVA is the largest public provider of electricity in the nation, providing power to 670,000 homes and burning through some 14,000 tons of coal per day. On December 22 the authority made headlines when one of its retention ponds collapsed, letting loose an avalanche of coal ash -- the toxic residue left over when coal is burned. More than 5 million cubic yards of ashy mud pushed its way through a neighborhood and into Tennessee's Emory River, knocked houses off foundations and blanketed river water with plumes of gray scum that flowed downstream.

New evidence indicates that in the wake of the disaster, the TVA may have intentionally collected water samples from clean spots in the Emory River, a major supplier of drinking water for nearby cities and a popular site for recreational activities such as swimming and fishing. Third-party tests have found high levels of toxins in the river water and in private wells, while the TVA has assured residents that tap water, well water and river water are safe.

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