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Spill damage could top \$300M

Study looks at coal ash cleanup for Dan River as result of Feb. leak

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An academic study completed last week projects the monetary damage caused by the coal ash spill in the Dan River in February could exceed \$300 million.

The estimate comes as Duke Energy, and potentially its customers,

face absorbing billions of dollars to rid North Carolina of uncovered coal ash basins and resolve related legal actions. The utility is facing an unknown price tag to clean up and restore the river where the controversy began nine months ago.

The massive Feb. 2 spill spread as far as 70 miles downstream, and choked the river and shoreline with sludge. Duke Energy has promised not to pass the cost of cleaning up the Dan River to customers.

The legacy of that cleanup will in-

clude how healthy the river and its aquatic inhabitants become, as well as building an array of projects that will improve the area along the river, such as boat ramps or walkways, to offset the destruction.

Estimates have been that the company will pay tens of millions of dollars on these restoration projects. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Duke Energy and North Carolina and Virginia environmental agencies entered into an agreement in June to begin assessing the

damage and will consider suggestions from the public about what projects might work. That report will be finished early next year.

Tens of millions of dollars might be a conservative estimate. The new research by Wake Forest University research biologist Dennis Lemly, who is an expert in coal ash, puts the cost of ecological, recreational, human health, property and aesthetic losses at close to \$300 million. That's based on effects

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In late February, Mark Bishopric, a managing partner of Three Rivers Outfitters, paddled past Duke Energy's Dan River Steam Station. Coal ash leaked into the river below the steam station on Feb. 2 after drainage pipes failed.

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measured six months after the spill, and could go much higher over time. Lemly found environmental losses alone amount to more than \$113 million of that amount.

The peer-reviewed article has been accepted for publication in a scientific journal. Lemly provided a copy on Wednesday. It is not part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife study, which will determine its own impacts. The federal and state study is meant to provide tangible benefits as soon as possible by getting all the parties involved to figure out the amount of damage and kind of restoration.

Jeff Brooks, a spokesman for Duke Energy, said Wednesday its participation in the joint plan underlines its commitment to the long-term health of the communities along the North Carolina-Virginia border.

"These are important priorities for Duke Energy, and we will continue our work on this project and other activities in the region to keep the Dan River a thriving re-

source for years to come," Brooks said.

In September, the company announced it had created a \$10 million fund to improve waterways in North Carolina and South Carolina, with \$1.5 million going to the Dan River basin region.

Too early to estimate

Tom McKenzie, a spokesman for U.S. Fish and Wildlife, said it's far too early to estimate costs.

"With these kinds of events — oil spills, release of chemicals and the like — it's generally a multiyear process," he said Wednesday.

Frank Holleman, an attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, which has sued the state alleging lax coal ash regulation, says he expects it will cost a lot.

"The amount should be substantial, given the fact that Duke Energy has admitted that it is incapable of cleaning up the coal ash in the river, and the substantial impact on the ecology of dumping that much coal ash and polluted coal ash water into the river all at once," Holleman said.

The spill, caused by two collapsed stormwater drain

pipes beneath a basin, put about 39,000 tons of coal ash and 27 million gallons of untreated ash wastewater into the river. Duke says it has removed about 3,000 tons from the river, closing a park for four months to stage cleanup equipment.

Duke Energy has estimated it could cost up to \$10 billion to remove all of the coal ash from its 32 ponds at 14 power plant sites across the state.

Legislation enacted last summer requires the company to remove ash from the four most vulnerable sites. A coal ash commission will determine how soon and to what extent basins at the other 10 sites should be closed.

The legislation didn't deal with who pays for all that, but Duke has indicated it would ask the state Utilities Commission to approve rate increases.

The chairman of the new commission earlier this month said "everyone will share the cost" of cleanup.

The coal ash and wastewater sludge in the Dan River mostly harmed mussels and other aquatic life that survive in river bottoms. That stretch of river near Eden is home to a rare fish and mus-

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sel that have been declared endangered species, and another mussel that is being considered for protection.

There are also concerns about longer-term harm to fish and species at the bottom of the food chain, which could work its way up the food chain.

On Monday, the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources reported promising new test results showing that aquatic insects "appear to be thriving" downstream of the Eden plant.

DENR official Tom Reeder said in a statement that the agency was "pleasantly surprised but still cautiously optimistic" about the health of insect communities. "Certainly, this is very good news for anyone concerned about the ecological health of the Dan River."

Those test results will be part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service damage assessment.

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