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Contact: Oversight and Government Reform Press Office, (202) 225-5051

Chairman Towns Launches Probes into Tennessee Coal Ash Spill

U.S. Representative Edolphus “Ed” Towns (D-NY), Chairman of the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, asked the Government Accountability Office to investigate the massive coal ash spill at a facility operated by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) in Kingston, Tennessee, one of the worst environmental disasters in U.S. history.

In a letter to GAO’s Acting Comptroller General, Chairman Towns asked GAO, the investigative arm of Congress, to determine whether TVA and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) followed appropriate environmental policies in responding to the spill at the Kingston Fossil Plant.

Chairman Towns indicated his deep concern about reports of inconsistent health and safety information provided to local residents by the EPA and the TVA regarding the safety of the local water supply and air quality.

“This inconsistency, if true, raises serious questions about the reliability of such information and the credibility of both agencies,” wrote Chairman Towns, whose Committee oversees the federal government. Towns, whose district was the prime recipient of nearly 2.8 million cubic yards of debris from the World Trade Center disaster on September 11, 2001, feels strongly that the EPA and TVA must be held to the highest standard of accuracy and transparency in order to protect the residents of the surrounding area.

The power plant, near Knoxville, released 5.3 million cubic yards of toxic material after a retention pond burst, possibly polluting key tributaries to the Tennessee River Valley watershed. The Tennessee River supplies drinking water to over millions of Americans across Tennessee,

North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and western Kentucky.

In the letter, Chairman Towns also noted that coal ash — a waste material captured after coal is burned for electricity and includes heavy metals like arsenic, mercury and lead — is not regulated by the EPA as toxic waste but at the state level. Towns stated his concern about similar retention ponds with no regulation governing their upkeep and maintenance which could pose a “potential threat” to communities across the nation.

In that context, Chairman Towns asked the GAO to compile a list of similar plants around the country and determine what, if any, problems they have had storing coal ash. In addition, Chairman Towns called on the GAO to make recommendations on how coal ash might be more safely stored.

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