

Draft Classification Frequently Asked Questions

Thanks to Governor McCrory's leadership, North Carolina has become a national leader in addressing the longstanding issue of coal ash. The proposed classifications released today represent another step towards coal ash closure, but our work is far from over. DEQ will continue to devote significant resources to protect the environment and public health from the threat of coal ash.

In an effort to provide the public with a better understanding of the draft classification process, staff at the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) put together a list of frequently asked questions (FAQ) on DEQ's draft classifications for Duke Energy's coal ash storage impoundments. The following FAQ explains what the classifications mean, how they were developed, and the next steps in the coal ash impoundment closure process.

What are the draft risk classifications?

DEQ assessed the risk to public health, safety, welfare and the environment that each coal ash storage impoundment in North Carolina poses. The classification will help determine the deadline for closing each coal ash impoundment, with greater priority for closure being given to those impoundments that present the greatest risk.

Why did the DEQ determine a risk classification for each impoundment?

State law requires that DEQ assess the risk of each coal ash storage impoundment and generate a draft list of proposed classifications based on its findings by Dec. 31, 2015.

What do the different classifications mean?

DEQ designated each coal ash impoundment as high, intermediate or low-risk based on several factors that measure a coal ash impoundment's potential risk to public health, safety and the environment. It is important to note that the draft classifications are NOT final. The draft proposed classifications will be finalized after the completion of public meetings and the submission of public comments.

Coal ash storage impoundments that are designated as high-risk require the excavation, removal and safe storage of all coal ash by Dec. 31, 2019.

Coal ash storage impoundments that are designated intermediate-risk require excavation, removal and safe storage of all coal ash by Dec. 31, 2024.

Coal ash storage impoundments that are designated low-risk require closure and safe storage of all coal ash by Dec. 31, 2029. The method of closure for low-risk impoundments could vary. Requirements for impoundments classified as low are similar to the federal coal ash rule, which does not require excavation of coal ash and allows for equally protective, less costly options.

How did DEQ decide which impoundments were high, intermediate, or low-risk?

As required by state law, DEQ determined an impoundment's risk classification based on three main factors. The three main factors evaluated by DEQ to determine an impoundment's classification were: impacts to groundwater, dam safety, and impacts to surface water.

These three factors were considered in light of new federal requirements for the safe disposal of coal ash. The combined level of risk of all three factors determined whether an impoundment was classified as high, intermediate or low risk.

How did DEQ measure these factors?

To develop risk classifications, state officials reviewed the comprehensive site assessments and corrective action plans that Duke Energy began submitting to DEQ in August for each of Duke Energy's 14 coal ash facilities. Staff inspected each of the 32 ash ponds, conducted and provided oversight for sampling, and reviewed discharges and corrective action plans for each facility. DEQ also reviewed the results of the drinking water supply well surveys, groundwater, dam safety and surface water considerations.

I read in the newspaper that an early report from DEQ had all the impoundments as "high-risk." Why did that change?

The draft proposed classifications are the result of months of review by DEQ staff of scientific information about each coal ash impoundment's impact to the environment and public health. The draft classifications changed as DEQ experts received and reviewed scientific information.

It's unfortunate that a special interest group tried to corrupt the process by leaking an early draft based on incomplete information. The leaked document represented a snapshot of the complicated scientific analysis DEQ conducted to determine the classifications. Their attempt to corrupt the process was also a disservice to the DEQ employees who have worked tirelessly to make sure the classifications are done correctly.

These draft classifications are subject to change based on public meetings that will be held in February and March, and public comment that will be received during the public comment period.

Will my electricity bill be affected?

The classification process will set the specific timetable for closure of each coal ash impoundment and the method of closure will be determined by closure plans, which will be submitted to DEQ for review and approval. In accordance with the coal ash law, impacts to electricity costs may be considered when making determinations to closure plans.

The NC Utilities Commission Public Staff estimated that the total cost of cleanup will be between \$2-10 billion depending on the method of closure for each impoundment. Duke has publicly stated that it plans to pass the cost of cleanup on to ratepayers, which would drive up your electricity bill.

I live in a county with a high risk classification site. What does that mean?

Of Duke Energy's 14 coal ash facilities, four sites are designated as high-risk by the coal ash law. The high risk classification means that the impoundments will be among the first to close, but does not mean there is an immediate threat to public safety or the environment. The coal ash law specifically requires that coal ash impoundments at Duke Energy's Sutton, Asheville, Riverbend and Dan River facilities be permanently closed by Aug. 1, 2019.

I live in a county with an intermediate risk classification site. What does that mean?

Impoundments that are classified as intermediate are recommended to be among the second group of impoundments to close. Like the impoundments classified as high-risk, all intermediate-risk impoundments require excavation, removal and safe storage of all coal ash. The coal ash law specifically requires that coal ash impoundments classified as intermediate-risk be permanently closed by Dec. 31, 2024.

I live in a county with a low risk classification site. What does that mean?

Low risk impoundments require closure and safe storage of all coal ash be completed by Dec. 31, 2029. The classification sets the schedule for closure of the coal ash impoundments, not the method of closure. The method of closure for low risk impoundments could vary and will be determined by a closure plan that protects public health and the environment. Closure plans for low risk impoundments are to be submitted to DEQ by Dec. 31, 2018.

What does the low-intermediate risk classification mean?

DEQ staff identified data gaps and deficiencies within the reports submitted by Duke Energy that limited DEQ’s ability to make definitive determinations for some impoundments. In cases where DEQ staff found that it did not have enough data to conclusively determine a classification level, the impoundment was given a range. Once DEQ completes its review of all data submitted by Duke, it will modify the classifications to either low or intermediate.

What happens next?

DEQ is drafting a written report that explains in detail how it developed each impoundment’s proposed classification, which will be made public within 30 days. The report will be provided to local health directors and made available in a library in each county where a coal ash facility is located.

Public input is critically important to this process. In February and March, DEQ will hold public meetings in each county with a coal ash facility to gather feedback on the proposed risk classification report. DEQ will also seek written comments from the public over a sixty-day period. All public comments will be considered before the proposed classifications are finalized.

To read the Executive Summary of the Draft Proposed Impoundment Classifications, click [here](#).

To watch a video on the draft proposed classifications, click [here](#).

To view a map of the draft proposed classifications for each coal ash impoundment, click [here](#).

For more information on coal ash in North Carolina, please visit www.ncdenr.gov.