

Retirees 'Living In Hell' After Coal Ash Spill

Bill Poovey, Associated Press Writer

KINGSTON, Tenn. (AP) — Ten months after millions of cubic yards of coal ash spilled from a Tennessee Valley Authority dam, Gary Topmiller and his wife, Pam, said they are trapped in their home across the Emory River from the site and "living in hell."

A retired millwright, Topmiller said Tuesday they are battling health problems and the TVA won't fairly compensate them so they can move from their 3-year-old house on the river and rebuild.

Topmiller was among several people who spoke to reporters about their problems since Dec. 22, when a breach in an earthen dike at TVA's Kingston Fossil Plant sent 5.4 million cubic yards of ash into the Emory River and onto private property.

TVA spokeswoman Barbara Martocci said the utility "has continued to work with the community since the day of the ash spill" and that effort will continue.

A half dozen property owners with complaints that TVA has treated them or others unfairly spoke to the media under a canopy during a torrential rain outside the utility's Kingston Outreach office after Martocci told them they could not speak to reporters inside, though there appeared to be an abundance of space.

"We're not having a press conference in this building," she said.

Martocci said the news conference would interfere with previously scheduled time for representatives of the TVA and other government agencies to meet with local residents harmed by the spill. She said the citizens' news conference was scheduled after they "found out we were having this availability."

Martocci said hundreds of damage claims have been filed and numerous lawsuits and they are being dealt with individually.

"The claims process is still open," she said.

TVA officials said they expect to get the ash out of the river by spring but the total cleanup, projected to cost \$1 billion, is expected to take years.

Topmiller, 60, said his wife's eyes have been swollen shut for months since the spill and they both "have been coughing and hacking." He said visitors complain of headaches and birds and small wild animals have been dying in his yard.

Topmiller said recent medical tests showed him with "off-the-chart levels of lead, mercury and aluminum" in his body.

"I paid for my own tests," he said. "We had our house checked. They found fly ash in

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our duct work, in our filters, in our refrigerator."

"I've had neighbors with pneumonia," he said.

Topmiller said TVA made an offer to buy his house and he refused it. He described the offer as a "laugher," but he would not divulge the dollar amount.

He said loud noise from dredges removing the ash is constant.

"I'd be out of here in a heartbeat," he said. "I had a contractor come in here and tell me what it would cost to replace my house. I don't want a dollar more. I told them I am not losing money just because you guys screwed up the environment. They said take it or leave it."

Mary Oram told reporters that she and her husband have lived on downstream Watts Bar Lake since 1972 and in 1995 bought a farm on Smith Mountain, planning to retire.

"Now Realtors are advising us that we won't be able to sell our lake home," Oram said.

She said a company on Smith Mountain is now seeking a contract to dispose of coal ash near their farm.

"At 70 years of age, our life is in turmoil," she said.

Mary Helen Nichols said she wants to know if it's "OK to raise my grandbabies" in Kingston, which is southwest of Knoxville.

TVA has pledged \$43 million to Roane County to repair its economy and image. A panel of local officials and TVA representatives decided to set aside \$32 million for county school buildings. Almost all the rest will go to roads, sewers, library improvements and turning an old movie house into an arts center.

Nichols said local elected officials in the county just want to know how much money they can get from TVA.

"I want to see them care about the people," she said.

Knoxville-based TVA serves nearly 9 million consumers in Tennessee and parts of Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia.

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