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Public Comment: AS 2021-03: Adjusted Standard for the Waukegan Station

Dear Mr. Brown and Members of the Pollution Control Board, I am writing today to share with you my concerns about the coal ash ponds associated with the NRG/Midwest Generating Coal fired power plant. I first offered testimony about my concerns about groundwater contamination from coal ash located on the property of the power plant well over five years ago, prior to the passage of SB 9, the revised coal ash standard. At the time, I lived in Waukegan, where I raised my family and kept a boat in Waukegan harbor. All of my children were involved in the youth sailing program, which continues to operate out of Waukegan harbor.

In 2018, I relocated from Waukegan to Highland Park, but continue to be actively involved in helping to resolve the environmental justice issues that plague Waukegan. Moreover, my eldest child works in the State's Attorney's office in Waukegan. Although I am no longer impacted by the legacy pollution on a daily basis, I still have a vested interest in this issue and believe it is critical for full remediation of this site, including the legacy coal ash not contained in designated ponds that is known to be actively contaminating the water and soil surrounding the plant.

NRG argues that full remediation should not be required because Waukegan's lake front is industrial. Yes, and it is not exclusively industrial. Waukegan harbor is a mixed use area that provides a deepwater port for commercial shipping as well as a busy recreational port filled with pleasure craft, one of the nicest beaches on the west side of Lake Michigan, and a vibrant youth sailing program that allows area children to both enjoy the lake and develop leadership and technical skills that readily transfer to other parts of their life. Although there is a legacy of industry, this area is heavily used by families and children seeking to enjoy the beauty of nature and access the lake. Youth Sailors are aware of the location of the coal ash ponds, the warm water discharge, and the hidden areas along the shore where one can ground a small boat and explore. These are the very areas impacted by the groundwater contamination from the legacy ash, which NRG deems the grassy field. Anyone enjoying the lakefront downstream of the power plant runs the risk of exposure to toxic chemicals present in the ground water runoff.

Coal ash contains numerous toxins, most notably arsenic, mercury, lead, and cadmium. These toxins are known to cause liver, lung, and kidney damage as well as several types of cancer, and impact children more than adults. Research continues to reveal the negative impacts of the toxins in coal ash on human beings, and each study further supports the need to remove all coal ash from areas where it can contaminate our air, soil, and water.

I have personally been impacted by diseases associated with exposure to the toxins from coal ash. My oldest child and I both have asthma. Emily was not diagnosed with asthma until we moved to Waukegan. I, having grown up near another coal fired plant, began experiencing asthma symptoms in childhood as well. My father, after a lifetime of exposure to environmental toxins, suffers from pulmonary fibrosis and is oxygen dependent. Most tragically, my middle child, Abigail, died of pulmonary emboli in 2020 at the age of 17. She was my sailor who spent the most time and from the earliest age exploring the areas north of the harbor and would have experienced the most exposure to the toxins in the soil and groundwater. Although there were no known risk factors, no evidence or evidence of covid in a healthy, athletic teenager, she developed blood clots that resulted in her death. She was planning to attend the Coast Guard Academy, sail competitively, and study naval engineering and architecture. She was considered to be one of their top recruits. Her loss impacts not only our family, but all of society because of the loss of potential. How many other young people are we losing because of exposure to toxins? A 2021 study is only now determining that exposure to the toxins involved in burning coal seem to be linked to the development of blood clots. Can we say that correlation is causation? Of course not. Can we say that no family should ever have to experience the grief of losing a child to something preventable simply by cleaning up a mess? Yes.

The toxins present in the soil and groundwater at the MidwestGen/NRG Waukegan Generating Station pose a threat to life and health. It is incumbent upon you, the pollution control board, to ensure that those toxins are removed. Do not allow NRG to continue to endanger the people of this community or allow their waste to remain and pose a threat to the drinking water of every community that relies on Lake Michigan for water (roughly 6.6. Million people).

My family is not the only one already impacted by the legacy of toxic pollution in this community, nor will it be the last one. I long for the day when we can say that the coal fired power plant is no longer a threat to our health and that we will be able to enjoy fully the beauty and peace of our lake front.