Valmont Power Plant Community Questions and Answers

Community engagement event

Naropa Nalanda Campus

Nov. 16, 2023

Where does Xcel get their money?

Xcel Energy is a utility company that earns money by charging customers for utility services like electric and natural gas services. You can learn more about Xcel Energy at their website: https://co.my.xcelenergy.com/s/about

Why is Xcel doing it now?

Regulatory requirements from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) required Xcel Energy to conduct groundwater monitoring around the coal ash landfill at the Valmont Power Station. Xcel Energy reported groundwater contaminants above the EPA's established groundwater protection standards. As a result, the EPA requires a corrective action process to address the source of pollution and clean up the existing contamination. More information about these EPA regulations can be found here: https://www.epa.gov/coalash/fact-sheet-2015-final-rule-disposal-coal-combustion-residuals-generated-electric-utilities

Who is funding this cleanup?

As the owner of the Valmont Power Station, Xcel Energy is responsible for the site and for funding the remediation activities.

Why is lithium and selenium in there?

Contaminants like lithium and selenium are commonly present in coal ash. Because the coal ash buried at the Valmont landfill does not have a protective lining in place, the coal ash has come into contact with groundwater and has led to lithium and selenium contamination of the local groundwater resources.

You are testing wells. What about city drinking water?

The City of Boulder obtains its water supply from streamflow on Middle Boulder Creek and North Boulder Creek, as well as from water diversions from the upper Colorado River. The local groundwater system at the Valmont Power Station is not a water source for the city, and the onsite contamination does not present a risk to the city's water supply. In addition, the City of Boulder is a public water system subject to Safe Drinking Water Act requirements. Water from the city utility is routinely tested to ensure it is safe and meets water quality standards. The City of Boulder 2023 Drinking Water Quality Report can be found here: https://bouldercolorado.gov/services/drinking-water-quality

People at MHP already don't have good water, so why not test there?

Monitoring wells between the Valmont site and San Lazaro MHP have been used to determine how far groundwater contamination has spread. Based on the collected data, no evidence suggests that groundwater contamination from the Valmont site has reached the San Lazaro MHP. Additionally, no elevated lithium or selenium contaminants (the contaminants associated with the coal ash at Valmont) were observed in San Lazaro's water testing results. Challenges with water quality at San Lazaro MHP are related to secondary drinking water standards (taste, smell, and color) and are believed to result from the water quality source from Kline Pond. Boulder County Public Health has also been working to address this separate matter.

What level of responsibility will Xcel and the county have to the community regarding contaminants?

Xcel Energy must meet regulatory standards for site remediation, as established by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE). Boulder County Public Health is committed to engaging with the community to ensure transparency and to provide information as it becomes available. The county will also seek to elevate community voices and concerns within the relevant regulatory spaces.

Who is responsible for the pollution and who is responsible for enforcing the cleanup?

Xcel Energy owns the Valmont Power Station and is responsible for the remediation of the on-site contamination. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) are the regulatory agencies responsible for enforcing the clean-up. Boulder County Public Health is responsible for working with these partners to ensure actions align with county priorities and regulations and with community feedback.

Is there going to be water quality testing closer to the pollution/community?

There is already extensive groundwater quality testing taking place around the Valmont Power Station. Xcel Energy has continued to expand its network of groundwater monitoring wells based on the movement of groundwater pollution. This has included monitoring privately owned wells near the Valmont property, which are at the greatest risk of contamination. You can see the extent of groundwater monitoring on Xcel's website: https://www.xcelenergy.com/coal_ash_management#colorado

What are the medical consequences and potential health risks? Resources?

Limited research exists about how lithium in drinking water may impact human health. However, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has set non-enforceable screening levels for lithium in drinking water. The EPA also has established regulatory standards for allowable selenium levels in drinking water (0.05 ppm). The EPA has found long-term exposure to high levels of selenium to have potential health effects such as hair and fingernail loss, damage to kidney and liver tissue, and impacts on the nervous and circulatory systems.

Inhalation of dust particles from coal ash and finished cement products can pose health risks. Ultra-fine particles (also known as PM2.5 - particulate matter that is 2.5 microns or smaller) can travel deep into the lungs and enter the bloodstream, impacting organs throughout the body. Particulate from coal ash is particularly concerning since it can be caustic and contain heavy metals and other toxic compounds.

Boulder gets windy. Is there research from Xcel to know more about air quality?

BCPH shares residents' concerns about potential air pollution from the Valmont Power Plant project. Excavation of landfill ash, processing the ash into cement products, and transport of the finished material all have the potential to produce airborne dust and particulate matter. The potential health risks of particulate materials are discussed above. Heavy equipment, generators and trucks will also produce emissions. Xcel Energy must develop plans to minimize and control these pollution sources.

Is there a way to get air monitoring pre and post-project?

BCPH will ask CDPHE to require the Xcel to install air monitoring equipment to provide real-time data to the public. BCPH will request that the monitoring be installed before the start of the project to establish baseline air quality data. BCPH also plans to install its air monitoring equipment in a neighborhood near the Valmont Power Plant.

Has Xcel been invited to these meetings? Is there opportunity for community to speak to Xcel? What is the process for that?

Xcel Energy previously hosted a public open house on May 23, 2023 to provide information about the anticipated remediation project. Boulder County Public Health maintains open communication with representatives at Xcel Energy and will continue to explore opportunities for the community to engage with Xcel directly. Additionally, Xcel Energy maintains an informational website where it shares information about the Valmont property: https://www.xcelenergy.com/coal_ash_management/valmont_action_plan

Is the project going to happen regardless of community comments?

Regulatory requirements from the Environmental Protection Agency necessitate the remediation project to address the source of groundwater contamination at the site. If the project were not to occur, the coal ash landfill would continue introducing contaminants into the environment and potentially impacting nearby water users. Boulder County Public Health is seeking community comment to ensure the remediation project is conducted in alignment with community interests.

Timeline?

Xcel Energy provided its initial Assessment of Corrective Measures report in February 2024. Xcel plans to begin groundwater remediation activities sometime between the end of 2024 and early 2025. Source removal of the coal ash is expected to begin later in 2025. The site remediation activities are subject to permitting by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE), which could impact the timeline. Remediation activities are expected to last between 10 to 12 years.

How can we see that money being given to the community?

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations that need remediation at the Valmont Power Station do not require Xcel Energy to make any payments to the county or individual residents.

What are the impacts of these chemicals on the human body and environment?

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations that necessitate remediation at the Valmont Power Station do not require Xcel Energy to make any payments to the county or individual residents.

Is there a way to get air monitoring at San Lazaro?

BCPH will be asking CDPHE to require the Xcel install air monitoring equipment capable of providing real-time data to the public. BCPH will request air monitoring be installed in neighborhoods near the Valmont Power Plant.

Was there air monitoring when they did burn coal ash?

The Valmont Power Plant began burning coal (and producing coal ash) in the 1920s to generate electricity. It would be many decades before air monitoring was required, but emissions from the plant have been monitored as required by the Title V permit for over 25 years.

Who are the impacted communities?

The current extent of groundwater contamination has only impacted a limited number of nearby property owners with privately owned groundwater wells. However, dust generated from the anticipated coal ash excavation and beneficial reuse project could impact local air quality. Xcel Energy is expected to submit detailed strategies for dust mitigation as part of its Engineering Design and Operations Plan. Boulder County Public Health is also exploring options for air quality monitoring to assess the potential impact of dust emissions on the surrounding community.

This plan cleans the groundwater, but what about the soil itself?

The proposed pump and treatment of the contaminated groundwater will primarily address the groundwater contamination. The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) would regulate any requirements for soil remediation for any land that will no longer serve as a landfill.

Does Xcel get to keep the benefits of this beneficial reuse? (Where is the money from selling their ready-mix product going?)

Xcel Energy is responsible for addressing the site remediation at the Valmont Power Station. The beneficial reuse project is anticipated to be part of the remediation activities undertaken and paid for by Xcel. The revenue generated by the beneficial reuse project is anticipated to offset costs for the site remediation project.

Are people getting sick from the Li and Se contamination?

There is currently no evidence to indicate that members of the community are getting sick from exposures to the lithium and selenium contamination. However, lithium and selenium can be potentially harmful if large amounts are ingested. Elevated levels of lithium and selenium have been detected locally in the groundwater around the Valmont Power Station. This is why extensive groundwater monitoring occurs at the Valmont Power Station to ensure drinking water sources are not impacted.

Could this groundwater contamination be connected to the poor water quality at San Lazaro?

Monitoring wells between the Valmont site and San Lazaro MHP have been used to determine how far groundwater contamination has spread. Based on the collected data, no evidence suggests that groundwater contamination from the Valmont site has reached the San Lazaro MHP. Additionally, no elevated lithium or selenium contaminants (the contaminants associated with the coal ash at Valmont) have been observed in San Lazaro's water. Challenges with water quality at San Lazaro MHP are related to secondary drinking water standards (taste, smell, and color) and are believed to result from the water quality source from Kline Pond. Boulder County Public Health has also been working to address this separate matter.

What power does the community have (lawyers, scientists, CU, other academia)?

Boulder County Public Health is committed to engaging with the local community to share information, elevate community voices, and ensure transparency about the Valmont Power Station's clean-up process. We anticipate opportunities for the community to provide feedback and comments regarding the remediation project.