

Nader Warns of Mine Dam Dangers

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WASHINGTON — One-fifth of the population of West Virginia — nearly 350,000 persons — living in narrow Appalachian Mountain hollows may be threatened by sudden, catastrophic flooding from unstable coal mine dams of the kind that breached a week ago Saturday, sweeping away a dozen Logan County mining communities with the loss of at least 89 lives, Ralph Nader charged Saturday.

The consumer and safety advocate and one of his principal staff investigators, Davitt McAteer, a young West Virginia lawyer who spent several days in the disaster area in southwestern West Virginia earlier last week, made this estimate of the flooding hazard from unstable coalfield dams in the nation's largest coal-producing state in a jointly-issued demand for a congressional investigation of the mining industry's "dereliction" throughout the central Appalachian region.

THEIR LETTER, calling it "imperative" for a congressional committee to study the coal industry's practice of erecting crudely made dams made of mine refuse and to propose legislation to prevent "future disasters," was sent Saturday to Sen. Warren G. Magnuson, D-Wash., and Rep.

Harley O. Staggers, D-W. Va. They are the chairman of the Senate and House Commerce committees.

Citing a five-year-old treaty of Appalachian coal mine waste heaps conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey, the letter said, "in West Virginia, Kentucky and Virginia, 60 such refuse piles were studied in 1966. Since that time, little has been done to correct or eliminate these hazards, and more such piles have been constructed."

"Untold thousands live

imperiled lives in these regions. In West Virginia alone one-fifth of the state's population may be living in areas where there are such impoundments."

The 1970 population of West Virginia was 1.7 million.

The Nader letter called last Saturday's sudden failure of a Pittston Co. coal mine dam on Buffalo Creek, near Lorado, W. Va., "not at all an act of nature or an act of God."

"THE BUFFALO Creek massacre is only one more in the long series of tragedies

which coal corporations have perpetrated upon the people of Appalachia, especially of West Virginia," the letter said.

Based on interviews last week by McAteer in the disaster area, the letter said in 1963 and again in 1968 local citizens' groups in the Buffalo Creek Valley had "signed a petition requesting that the dam be drained periodically" and appealed to local, state and federal government officials to "correct the hazard."

"Finally," the letter said, "as recently as one week prior to the disaster, officials of the (Pittston) company had been warned by specialists in the mining field that a hazardous condition existed." The specialists were not identified in the letter.

But the letter said Sens. Jennings Randolph and Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, and former Gov. Hulett C. Smith, all Democrats, had been among those who "did not act."

Victims of West Virginia Flood Recall Their Natural Paradise

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The one thing they shared in common in later years was the existence of the huge dam at the head of the hollow.

"It wasn't on everybody's mind every minute, nothing like that," said Max Bircher, a coal miner who grew up in the hollow and now lives at Man. "There are three other dams up that hollow. But whenever somebody would come driving by blowing his horn and shouting that the dam was about to break, he didn't have to say what dam he was talking about."

That happened at least four times in recent years, so often that many disregarded the warning they got minutes before the dam broke and perished as a result.

"I've laid out in my car up on the hill with my family all night long many a time," said Willard Kilgore, Lundale. "My neighbor, Ennis Mays, came by that morning and told me the dam was going to break, and Ennis worked up at the dam. But hell, that's been hollered so many times before didn't nobody believe him."

Kilgore, a miner disabled at 51 because of rock dust in his throat, got out with his wife and two daughters just in time to watch their home demolished from 50 feet away.

Danny Gibson, who also had been working at the dam, tried to alert the hollow, too. "I got a lot of people up," he said, "but a lot went back to bed."

Otto Mutters, a deputy sheriff, also tried to warn the populace. "I went to the Trent household and tried to warn Mrs. Trent and Junior Trent, but they didn't heed me. I hear they lost three sons, a mother and a daughter that I know of."

Such impoundments as that at Three Forks number in the scores throughout the Appalachian coal fields. Just after a slate slide in Aberlham, Wales, in 1966 crushed a school house and killed 121 people, the U.S. Geological Survey inspected the Appalachian dams and found "at least 75" that were poorly constructed.

The dam at Three Forks began as a single impoundment. Later, slag was dumped behind it to form a second reservoir, and still later a third, so finally there were three pools and the beginning of a fourth stretching three-quarters of a mile up a side hollow at the head of Buffalo Creek. As the pollution settled out in one pool, the water was pumped to the next.

The pool-by-pool filtering system was clearly effective.

THE DAM at Three Forks provided benefits, too, to the residents of Buffalo Creek Hollow, especially the youthful and adventurous ones.

"We used to go swimming up there in the summertime, skinny-dipping," said David Mullins, 17, Lorado. "There was a Scout Camp at Latrobe with a pool, but we had more fun swimming up at the mine. That first lake was really clean. We found an old tire off an end-loader and used it to hold down a plank, and it made a pretty good diving board. We swam up there all the time. Some guy from the mine would come out and run us off, but we always went back when he left."

Such a structure at the head of the hollow plainly represented a threat to all who lived below.

TO A COAL miner, the existence of hazard is a way of life.

Slides, floods, cave-ins, disease—these are the con-

stant companions of a coal mining family. Mrs. Chamber's father was killed in a mine accident, her stepfather died of black lung and her husband, she said, "wheezes like a train."

Floods are nothing new in Buffalo Creek Hollow, either—natural floods, that is, when spring rains and snow-melt send the creek out of its banks. Or slides. Just last July, boulders as heavy as 100 pounds tumbled down the mountainsides into Amherstdale. Danger is ever-present. Life goes on.

The people of Buffalo Creek Hollow counted it a full and rich life indeed.

There was plenty of coal in the hollow, and plenty of jobs. Few could remember days when that was not so. Many residents had paid off their mortgages years ago, owned two cars, nice furniture and a houseful of appliances.

Comfortable, pleasant, friendly—and easy, therefore, to put out of mind day by day the hulking slag-heap dam at the head of the hollow.

Oddly, the morning the dam broke, and during the night before, the people at the mouth of the hollow, 17 miles downstream, were the ones more concerned about the prospect of a flood. The Guyandotte was up to 29 feet; in the flood of '63 it had gotten up to 32 feet and backed water well up Buffalo Creek. During the previous four days it had rained 4.7 inches, and the residents were watching the river closely.

AT THE HEAD of the hollow, Mason Blankenship, however, was thoroughly concerned about the stability

of the dam. He worked at the Buffalo Mining Co. tipple several miles from the dam and decided to drive over and have a look.

"The water lacked a foot or a foot and a half from being at the very top," he said. "I drove back to the tipple and told the men there I thought the dam was going to go. Some of them went and got their families."

Brady Elswick was concerned, too. He knew the dam as well as anybody. "I started the slate dump myself," he said, "and worked on the dam ever since, about 20 years." The dam looked safe enough to him Friday night, he said, but on Saturday morning it felt like it was "rocking back and forth."

Some called the disaster an act of God.

Charles Adkins, a 35-year-old miner from Stowe, sneered at that. "An act of God?" he said. "I've been up there all my life, and I didn't see God driving one of them bulldozers."

To Adkin's neighbor, James Bragg, the idea was sacrilegious.

"That's a lie they told on God," he said.

4 Bodies Recovered; Flood Toll Hits 93

MAN, W. Va. (UPI) — Four more bodies were recovered from the flood-devastated Buffalo Creek Valley Saturday, just one week after a mine slag pile dam broke and sent a wall of water churning down the narrow valley.

Authorities said 93 bodies have been recovered from the rubble of smashed homes and buildings.

Senate's Remap Plan Clears House Hurdle