

Residents of Veliki Crljeni, a suburban settlement only 50 kilometers from the center of Belgrade, again wrote to the Serbian President and the Prime Minister over the past week, demanding that institutions and the state, the owner of power utility Elektroprivreda Srbije (EPS), resolve the pollution problem that has been plaguing them for more than three years, daily Danas wrote.

Nearly 200 families living in the settlement of Veliki Crljeni struggle with water and air pollution, as well as with mudslides, created by the inactive yet unreclaimed open-pit coal mine located barely a few dozen meters from the nearest houses.

Even though described as inactive by EPS, the mine remains unreclaimed, with coal-contaminated wastewater flowing through the settlement and coal dust being spread by winds. Under the law, an open-pit coal mine is considered active until reclaimed.

The law stipulates that the pit of a mine must be located at least 500 meters away from the nearby settlements and the perimeter at least 300 kilometers. In Veliki Crljeni, the perimeter extends to 40 meters and the pit to 90 meters from the nearest houses.

“Between the pit and our houses run the Ibarska Magistrala road, which is disintegrating, wastewaters released by Kolubara Prerada, and three power transmission lines. While coal excavation displaced all sorts of animals from their habitats, thrash is now attracting them and we can’t let our children go play outside for fear of snakes, rats, and now jackals. The pit, running some 30 meters deep, has sucked up the groundwater, trees are going dry, our house walls are cracking, and we are suffocating from dust and stench. At least one member, often the entire families, at each of the 170 households use an inhaler, while one in three households has a cancer-stricken member. Opposite our houses, there are quartz sand and coal dust hills, on the right hand side, there is a coal-fired plant’s ash depository, and less than a 50 meters away runs a railway which is used to transport coal in open wagons to the Nikola Tesla and Kolubara coal power plants. Some 10 meters further, coal washing wastewaters released by Kolubara Prerada flow. We don’t open windows, we don’t take our washing out, water is not suitable for drinking,” says local resident Vesna Terzić, chairwoman of the Tihi Lug Veliki Crljeni association.

Residents’ request for mining inspection minutes rejected

Terzić says that the residents have turned to all relevant institutions over the recent years but that none has taken any steps. She also claims that various inspectorates have filed reports containing incorrect and contradictory data. According to her, the mining inspectorate examined the situation on the ground last year and found damage on houses, irregularities in EPS' operations, and air and water pollution, but made no mention of this data in its later report, while the residents' request for minutes was rejected.

"The Official Gazette states that wastewater is not treated because 'the system is obsolete,' while the state inspector has sent us a response claiming that the water is clean. The Ministry of Mining and Energy sent us a response according to which the matter is not in its purview. Then a mining inspector came here and wrote a report according to which we are 180 meters away from the pit. Cracks on buildings were registered, but no proof was found that they had been caused by the mine. Of course no proof was found - EPS' experts made no assessments prior to the excavation, therefore there is no pre-existing condition. The environmental inspector wrote in a report that wastewater overflowing has been caused by beavers, even though it is a commonly known fact that these animals seek exceptionally clean water for their habitats," the Veliki Crljeni residents wrote in a memo to representatives of state authorities.

An environmental inspector wrote in a report that wastewater overflowing has been caused by beavers

The municipality of Lazarevac, to which Veliki Crljeni belongs, and the local municipal office have been ignoring the area's residents, while talks with representatives of the environment and spatial planning ministries have had no results, according to Terzić.

She goes on to say that the open-pit coal mine was opened in the wake of the 2014 floods, when EPS urgently needed coal. However, the mine's opening was carried out with no regard for the procedure, with no strategic environmental impact assessment produced, as found by the Administrative Court.

EPS opened the mine in the wake of the 2014 floods, without first producing an environmental impact assessment

"After the residents raised the alarm, EPS left the pit in August 2017, having ceased its

operation a year earlier, in May 2016. The company moved about a kilometer toward Vreoci and opened the G open-pit mine. Even though it was determined back then that we were affected, that EPS should react and carry out detailed measurements, this has not been done to date. EPS has responded that it is carrying out measurements and that it is not to blame for the situation," says Terzić.

After the Administrative Court annulled the Plan for the Opening of the Veliki Crljeni open-pit mine, because it had been adopted without an environmental impact assessment, the mine should be reclaimed and the assessment carried out.

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