

Masthead

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PMI applauded for making green use of coal ash

As the state and its utilities grapple with what to do with coal ash - the residue left when coal is burned to make electricity - a Cary company is quietly doing something about it.

PMI Ash Technologies pipes the residue, fly ash, out of the coal plants, extracts the residual energy and then produces a material that can be used to make concrete. That product is considered an ecofriendly building material because it reduces the amount of ash that is put in coal ash ponds and landfills.

"Concrete is like banana bread: Everyone has their own recipe," says Lisa Cooper, PMI's senior vice president. "Within concrete there is a binder called portland cement (like the eggs in your recipe). The fly ash can replace that binder."

Using ash in this way is popular with environmental groups because it reduces the amount of ash that can leach into groundwater. Concrete makers like it because it's durable and less expensive than portland cement.

PMI - along with Dominion, the Richmond, Va., power company - received an environmental award from the EPA for its efforts. It also has been recognized by Sustainable North Carolina.

This morning, PMI gets an honor of a different sort: The company will be profiled on the Discovery Channel's Profile Series at 7 a.m. The filming for the program was done at the Chesapeake Energy Center in Chesapeake, Va., where the company's carbon burn-out technology is used.

PMI started in 1986 in Florida and was part of Florida Power Corp. It became a subsidiary of Progress Energy after the Raleigh utility bought Florida Power. Progress divested itself of the business in 2007.

PMI, now headquartered in Cary, has 21 employees and facilities in Massachusetts, South Carolina, Florida and Virginia. It has teamed with Dominion at its power stations in Somerset, Mass., and Chesapeake, Va. PMI has had less success getting utilities such as Progress and Duke, which dump their coal ash into ponds, to sign on to its efforts.

Cooper said PMI would love to work with both utilities but acknowledged that what PMI does is not cheap. What's needed, she says, is public support and legislative action to make the cost feasible for utilities.

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