



Fall 2018 VT Intro to Appal...

# The Tennessee Valley Authority: A Timeline of Controversy



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Since the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority in 1933, the organization has been under constant scrutiny because of the controversies generated during the completion of its goals. The organization was founded in New Deal legislature, with the purpose of providing power to poor regions of Appalachia. In order to achieve this goal, the TVA harnessed the regions natural power sources, building dams and coal power plants to perform its goals. However, the construction and operation of these facilities has had a great impact on the land and people of Appalachia, generating controversy. In order to analyze controversy in the TVA, the question must be asked: What controversies have the Tennessee Valley Authority generated, and how have they affected public opinion?

In order to properly analyze the controversies associated with the TVA, I began by studying the background of the organization. My research led me

to a few different law journals reviewing the Tennessee Valley Authority Act, providing a legal view of the corporation. This gave me the necessary knowledge to dive deeper into the topic, and begin uncovering the major controversies caused by the organization. Once my research was completed, I narrowed the field down the three major events: the Norris Dam construction, the *Tennessee Valley Authority v. Hill* case, and the 2008 Kingston Power Plant coal slurry spill.

The first incident reviewed was the Norris Dam construction, specifically the TVA's use of eminent domain. The Norris Dam was constructed on the Clinch River in Anderson County, TN from 1933–1936. The dam was one of the first projects completed by the newly founded TVA and was widely supported for bringing jobs and power to the region. However, it was also one of the TVA's first uses of eminent domain. Eminent domain is a constitutional power allowing the government to take privately owned land if necessary to perform constitutionally delegated duties, as long the citizens are properly compensated (The Yale Law Journal, 819). The Norris dam required the government to obtain 125,000 acres of land, displacing 15,750 people (Norris TN: Community Uprooted). The Norris dam project provides an isolated case showing the dichotomy of the organization: it brought thousands of jobs to the area and power for many, but displaced thousands of people, destroying a community.

The *Tennessee Valley Authority v. Hill* Supreme Court case was one of the first environmental disputes involving the TVA. The case involves an interesting legal debate. In 1973, the Endangered Species act was passed, which included a clause prohibiting federal construction that could compromise the habitat of an endangered species. The Tellico dam was 80% complete when the endangered snail darter was found near the site. This resulted in a lawsuit trying to halt construction. The Supreme Court agreed that further

construction was against the spirit of the law and ruled the dam illegal (Georgeff, 664). The case provides an interesting look into the true intentions of the TVA. Many people in Appalachia respect and seek to preserve the land, but the TVA's actions in this case reveal that the organization views the regions natural beauty as second to their goal to provide electricity.

On December 22nd, 2008, the holding pond of the Kingston coal power plant was compromised, releasing 5.4 million cubic yards of coal ash slurry into the land of the Emory river (Chatterjee, 2009). The sludge covered twelve homes, rendering three permanently uninhabitable. No one was seriously injured, but the slurry contained toxic chemicals that damaged the local wildlife. Chatterjee's study found that local rivers contained trace amounts of arsenic, lithium, boron, and lithium. The toxicity levels were found to be safe for humans, but it was reported that a significant amount of fish were killed by the spill (Satterfield). The TVA considered the incident an accident that could not have been predicted, but many questioned whether the TVA did all they could to prevent the disaster.

In conclusion, the Tennessee Valley Authority is an inherently controversial organization. Its very existence is a political hot topic, as it is a symbol of big government taking over aspects of the private sector. This creates a population that despises the TVA based purely on political stances. Additionally, the TVA works intimately with the natural beauty of Appalachia, as they use the natural power to generate electricity. This causes friction with environmental groups, as many TVA projects jeopardize the ecology. Finally, many of the projects require the displacement of citizens, which causes hatred in the displaced populations, and others fear that they may be next. These factors combine to create a storm of controversy surrounding the TVA. However, the TVA has also had an undisputed impact on the modernization of the region. Going forward, it will be interesting to

see if the Tennessee Valley Authority runs into more controversy, and how that controversy will affect the public opinion on the corporation.

Creative Portion: <https://www.sutori.com/story/controversy-and-the-tennessee-valley-authority--3gyU9C17i6RxWaRCKWNquoXJ>.

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