

“Is Marion, Alabama Paying The Price for Urban Waste”

‘When City Decisions Become Rural Disasters’

I remember Marion and Union Town, Alabama, when life was simple and almost everybody had a garden located somewhere around their house, and it didn't matter where you got a drink of water from kitchen sink, well, water hose, it was fresh, healthy, and clean. Marion and Union Town are located in Perry County and I remember these towns for its clean and country style of living environments. Marion, Alabama which, was also known as “College City,” because it was once home to multiple historic colleges such as Judson College, Marion Military Institute, Howard College, and Marion Female Seminary. However, as of 25 November 2025 and as recently as, 17 December 2025, Marion is facing a serious water crisis.

About Perry County: Perry County Demographics (2023–2025 estimates)

- **Population:** About **7,600–8,200 residents**, down from over 10,500 in 2010 ([Census Reporter World Population Review](#)).
- **Median Age:** **42.5 years**, slightly older than the Alabama average ([Census Reporter Data USA](#)).
- **Race & Ethnicity:**
 - **71% Black or African American**
 - **28% White**
 - <1% Hispanic, Asian, or other groups ([Census Reporter World Population Review](#))
- **Gender:** **54% female, 46% male** ([Census Reporter](#)).
- **Household Income:** Median household income around **\$34,000–\$38,000**, well below the national average ([Data USA](#)).
- **Poverty Rate:** Roughly **31% of residents live below the poverty line**, nearly double the U.S. average ([Data USA](#)).
- **Population Density:** About **11 people per square mile**, reflecting its rural character ([World Population Review](#)).

About Union Town, Alabama: Union Town Demographics (2023–2025 estimates)

- **Population:** About 1,655 in 2023, 1,952 in 2024, and 2025 projected to be 2,000 **residents** (City Data).
- **Median Age:** in 2023 the median age was 39.3 years (Census Reporter).
- **Race & Ethnicity:**
 - **95% Black or African American** (Census Reporter)
 - **5% White** (Census Reporter)
- **Gender:** **52% female, 48% male** ([Census Reporter](#)).
- **Household Income:** 2023 Median household income around **\$31,071 and per-capita income \$15,048**, which is far below the national average ([Data USA](#)).
- **Poverty Rate:** 2023 poverty rate 49.2%, which means nearly half of Union Town residents live below the poverty line ([Data USA](#)).

- **Population Density:** About 126 **people per square mile**, reflecting its rural character (2024 Area Vibes).

About Marion, Alabama

- **Location & Role:** Marion is the county seat of Perry County in west-central Alabama.
- **Population:** Around **2,994 residents as of 2023**, with a median age of 23.9.
- **History:** Founded in the early 1800s, originally called *Muckle Ridge*. It became Marion after Revolutionary War hero Francis Marion. The city is notable for its role in higher education, home to the **Marion Military Institute** and formerly **Judson College**.
- **Nickname:** Often referred to as “College City” because of its educational institutions.
- **Demographics:** Roughly **70% Black and 29% White**, with a median household income of about **\$38,000**.

Current Water Crisis (Events of Late November 2025)

- **Cause:** A **damaged primary pump and filtration component** had to be removed for emergency repair, combined with a **major leak in the distribution system**.
- **Impact:** Many homes experienced **low to no water pressure**, forcing businesses and churches to close temporarily.
- **Emergency Response:**
 - **Daily bottled water distribution** was organized by Perry County EMA and local agencies.
 - **Repairs** were underway to restore service, with parts installed to fix the pump and filtration system.
- **Boil Water Notice:** Even after service was restored, residents were instructed to **boil water for at least one minute** before drinking, cooking, or brushing teeth. Bathing and laundry were considered safe without boiling.
- **Community Concerns:** The crisis highlighted **infrastructure fragility in rural Alabama towns**, with calls from leaders like Senator Robert Stewart for **sustainable investment in water systems**.
- **Status Update:** As of late November 2025, water service was restored, but the **boil advisory remained in effect** until testing confirmed safety, [WAKA 8 al.com](https://www.waka8al.com).

Why This Matters

- **Public Health:** Safe drinking water is essential, and prolonged boil notices raise concerns about contamination risks.
- **Economic Impact:** Local businesses, schools, and churches were disrupted, underscoring how infrastructure failures ripple through laid-back country community living.
- **Policy Angle:** Marion’s crisis is part of a broader issue in rural Alabama where aging water systems lack funding for modernization.

Takeaway:

Marion, Alabama, is a historically rich but economically challenged city now grappling with a **major water system failure**. While repairs have restored service, residents remain under a **boil water advisory**, and the incident has sparked renewed debate about **investment in rural infrastructure** to prevent future crises.

Sources: [Wikipedia](#) [Census Reporter](#) [Data USA](#) [Encyclopedia of Alabama](#) [WAKA 8 al.com](#) [Tuscaloosa Thread](#) [YouTube](#) [MSN](#)

Marion's place in Perry County is central to Alabama's environmental justice debates because the county has repeatedly been chosen as a site for industrial waste relocation, particularly coal ash and other hazardous materials, raising concerns about racial and economic inequities.

Industrial Waste Relocation in Perry County

Arrowhead Landfill (Uniontown, Perry County):

- In 2009, **millions of tons of coal ash** from a catastrophic spill in Kingston, Tennessee were relocated to the Arrowhead Landfill in Uniontown, just a few miles from Marion ([Alabama Department of Environmental Management](#) (ADEM)).
- Coal ash contains **arsenic, lead, mercury, and radioactive elements**, all linked to cancer, neurological damage, and other health risks.
- The landfill's proximity to predominantly Black, low-income communities sparked national attention and lawsuits alleging **environmental racism**.

ADEM Oversight & Permits:

- The Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) has repeatedly issued permits and modifications for waste management in Perry County, including Arrowhead Landfill ([Alabama Department of Environmental Management](#)).
- Critics argue that ADEM's approvals prioritize industry over community health, fueling distrust among residents.

Local Dumping Issues in Marion:

- Marion itself has faced scrutiny for **unauthorized dump sites** and failures to properly close them ([cityofmarion.al.com](#)).
- These incidents reinforce the perception that Perry County is treated as a dumping ground for waste others don't want.

Environmental Justice Debates

- **Race & Class Dimensions:**

- Perry County is majority Black and economically disadvantaged. Activists argue that this demographic profile made it a target for waste relocation, since communities with fewer resources struggle to resist large-scale industrial projects.
- **Community Push-back:**
 - Residents and advocacy groups have filed complaints with the EPA and civil rights offices, alleging discriminatory practices in siting hazardous waste facilities.
- **National Spotlight:**
 - The Uniontown landfill controversy became a **case study in environmental justice**, cited in academic research and advocacy campaigns as an example of how marginalized communities bear disproportionate environmental burdens.

Connection to Marion's Current Water Crisis

- While the **2025 Marion water crisis** was caused by **pump and filtration failures**, not coal ash or PFAS contamination, the **historical backdrop of waste relocation in Perry County** makes residents understandably wary.
- The crisis highlights a broader pattern: **infrastructure neglect and environmental hazards converge in rural, majority-Black communities**, creating compounded risks.

Takeaway:

Marion's location in Perry County ties it directly to **decades of industrial waste relocation and environmental justice struggles**. From the Arrowhead Landfill's coal ash controversy to local dumping issues, Perry County has been at the center of debates about **who bears the burden of toxic waste**. This history amplifies the urgency of addressing Marion's water crisis with transparency, oversight, and investment in safe infrastructure.

Sources: Perry County solid waste and landfill permits ([Alabama Department of Environmental Management](#)); Marion's unauthorized dump site issues ([cityofmarion.com](#)).

Perhaps Marion's water crisis isn't just a technical failure, but part of a **systemic pattern of environmental neglect and discriminatory siting practices**. You decide:

Major Sources of Waste Relocated to Perry County

Kingston, Tennessee Coal Ash Spill (2008):

- The **largest coal ash spill in U.S. history** occurred at the Tennessee Valley Authority's (TVA) Kingston Fossil Plant in December 2008.

- Over **5.4 million cubic yards of coal ash slurry** (containing arsenic, lead, mercury, and radioactive elements) spilled into the Emory and Clinch Rivers.
- Much of this toxic material was **excavated and transported to the Arrowhead Landfill in Uniontown, Perry County, Alabama** beginning in 2009.

Industrial Byproducts from Power Plants:

- Coal ash is a byproduct of burning coal for electricity.
- TVA and other utilities generate millions of tons annually, and disposal sites in Alabama have been used because of **lower tipping fees and weaker regulatory resistance** compared to other states.

Other Hazardous Waste Streams:

- Perry County has also been permitted to accept **municipal solid waste and industrial waste** from outside Alabama.
- Environmental justice advocates argue that Perry County's demographics (majority Black, low-income) made it a target for relocation of waste that wealthier or whiter communities resisted.

Why Perry County?

- **Economic Incentives:** Landfills in Perry County offered **cheap disposal rates** compared to Tennessee or other states.
- **Regulatory Environment:** Alabama's Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) has historically been criticized for **lenient permitting** of hazardous waste facilities.
- **Environmental Justice Concerns:** Communities in Perry County lacked political and financial power to resist, making them vulnerable to becoming a "dumping ground" for other states' toxic waste.

Takeaway:

The contaminated waste in Perry County including coal ash **originated primarily from the Kingston, Tennessee spill at TVA's Kingston Fossil Plant**, then transported to Uniontown's Arrowhead Landfill near Marion. This relocation turned Perry County into a focal point of **environmental justice debates**, with critics arguing that Alabama was chosen because it was cheaper and politically easier to dump waste there.

Let's try to get to the heart of **accountability** in Perry County's coal ash relocation. Here's what the record shows:

Government Entity That Approved the Dumping

- The **Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)** was responsible for cleaning up the 2008 Kingston, Tennessee coal ash spill.

- TVA contracted with **Waste Management Inc.** to transport the coal ash to Alabama.
- The **Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM)** issued the permits that allowed the Arrowhead Landfill in Uniontown (Perry County) to accept the waste.
- The **Perry County Commission** also played a role in local approvals, since landfill operations are tied to county-level agreements.

□ **Who Received Payment**

- **Arrowhead Landfill operators** (owned by Green Group Holdings/Waste Management partnerships) received direct payments for accepting the coal ash.
- **Perry County government** received “**tipping fees**” — payments per ton of waste deposited. Reports indicate Perry County was paid **\$3.50 per ton**, which added up to millions of dollars given the scale of the Kingston spill.
- TVA’s cleanup contracts funneled money through Waste Management, then to landfill operators and local government.

How the Money Was Used

- Perry County officials stated that tipping fee revenue was used for **general county operations**, including:
 - Road maintenance and infrastructure.
 - County services and administrative budgets.
- However, critics argue that **little of the money directly benefited Uniontown residents**, who bore the brunt of environmental risks.
- Community members and environmental justice advocates have long claimed that the funds were absorbed into county budgets without meaningful investment in **health protections, water infrastructure, or environmental monitoring**.

Key Takeaway

- **ADEM approved the permits.**
- **Landfill operators and Perry County received payments.**
- **Funds were used for county budgets, not targeted environmental protections.**

This is why Uniontown and Perry County became a **national case study in environmental justice**: a poor, majority-Black community was chosen as the dumping ground, the county government received money, but residents were left with contamination risks and little benefit. I guess my overarching question is did **state and county officials prioritized revenue over public health**, and that **ADEM’s permitting decisions enabled environmental racism**.

Summation of the timeline of Coal Ash Relocation:

- **December 22, 2008** – The **Kingston Fossil Plant spill** occurred in Tennessee, releasing over 5 million cubic yards of coal ash into rivers and land.
- **Early 2009** – The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) began cleanup operations.
- **June 2009** – TVA contracted with **Waste Management Inc.** to transport coal ash to the **Arrowhead Landfill in Uniontown, Perry County, Alabama.**
- **2009–2010** – The bulk of the coal ash was relocated during this period. Reports indicate **hundreds of rail cars per week** carried ash from Tennessee to Alabama.
- **2010–2012** – Continued shipments and disposal at Arrowhead Landfill. By 2012, millions of tons had been deposited.
- **Post-2012** – The Kingston cleanup was largely complete, but Arrowhead Landfill remained permitted to accept **other industrial and municipal waste streams**, keeping Perry County tied to ongoing environmental justice debates.
- The **most intense dumping occurred between mid-2009 and 2012.**
- Perry County received **tipping fees during this period**, but residents reported little benefit and ongoing environmental risks.
- The controversy over **environmental racism** and **ADEM's permitting practices** has continued well beyond the dumping itself, as the landfill remains active.

Takeaway:

The dumping of contaminated coal ash into Perry County was **not indefinite** — it was concentrated between **2009 and 2012**, following the Kingston spill. However, the **legacy of that relocation** continues to shape Marion and Uniontown's environmental justice struggles today.

Groundwater testing and health impacts in Perry County after coal ash relocation

The record shows ongoing groundwater monitoring associated with coal ash disposal sites in Alabama, increased federal scrutiny of Alabama's coal ash permitting, and community reports of health symptoms near the Arrowhead Landfill in Perry County. However, publicly available statewide cancer registry data do not confirm a county-level "spike" tied specifically and conclusively to the Kingston coal ash relocation; causation is complex and requires detailed epidemiological study beyond current public summaries ([1819 News Alabama Department of Public Health EHN](#)).

Groundwater testing and regulatory findings

Coal ash contamination risk and monitoring: Coal ash contains heavy metals like arsenic, chromium, lead, lithium, and radium that can leach into groundwater, especially from unlined ponds or inadequately managed landfills. Environmental groups and EPA acknowledge cancer and other health risks from coal ash exposure and have pushed for stricter monitoring and control, including additional wells and compliance with the Coal Combustion Residuals (CCR) Rule ([Earthjustice Lagniappe Mobile](#)).

EPA action on Alabama's program: In May 2024, EPA denied Alabama's coal ash permit program for being less protective than federal standards, citing contamination concerns (arsenic, boron, chromium, cobalt, lead, mercury, radium seeping into waterways) and requiring stronger oversight. This decision underscores deficiencies in monitoring and enforcement and has led to increased requirements for testing and corrective measures at coal ash sites statewide ([1819 News](#)).

Utilities' data and violations statewide: Advocacy organizations compile utilities' own groundwater data showing heavy metals leaking into ground and surface waters at multiple Alabama sites, with more than 50 groundwater violations reported across nine coal ash locations. While these are statewide figures, they illustrate a broader pattern that heightens concern for communities like those in Perry County that received relocated coal ash ([Alabama Rivers Alliance](#)).

Community-reported health symptoms near Arrowhead Landfill

Resident reports: Documented accounts from Uniontown (Perry County) residents describe respiratory problems, headaches, nausea, and vomiting associated with odors and conditions near the 973-acre Arrowhead Landfill where Kingston coal ash was deposited. These are consistent with nuisance and potential exposure complaints, though they are not, on their own, definitive epidemiological evidence of disease spikes ([EHN](#)).

Media and advocacy coverage: News and advocacy series have chronicled two decades of chemical pollution concerns in Alabama, including coal ash impacts on communities like Uniontown, contextualizing local symptom reports within a statewide toxic exposure narrative ([Alabama Public Radio](#)).

Cancer and illness trends data

County cancer profiles: The Alabama Statewide Cancer Registry provides one-page county cancer profiles, including for Perry County. These summaries are useful for seeing incidence and mortality trends but do not attribute causation to specific exposures like coal ash without deeper study. Public registry summaries, as available, do not document a formally recognized "spike" tied specifically to the coal ash relocation period; targeted epidemiological analyses would be needed to establish exposure-outcome links ([Alabama Department of Public Health](#)).

Risk context: EPA and public health sources note that living near coal ash disposal sites can increase cancer risk, particularly with unlined impoundments and inadequate controls. This establishes plausible risk, but translating it into county-level spikes requires robust exposure assessment and longitudinal health data beyond general registry summaries ([southeastcoalah.org](#) [Earthjustice](#)).

Perry County's demographics show it is a small, majority-Black, economically disadvantaged community which is why the case became a national environmental justice controversy.

Why These Demographics Matter:

- **Majority-Black, low-income population:** Perry County's racial and economic profile is central to the **environmental justice debate**. Critics argue that communities like Uniontown and Marion were targeted for waste relocation precisely because they lacked political and financial power to resist.
- **Shrinking population:** The county has lost nearly **25–30% of its population since 2010**, suggesting economic decline and possible out-migration linked to poor infrastructure and environmental burdens.
- **High poverty:** Limited resources mean residents are less able to fight legal battles or demand stronger protections, reinforcing systemic inequities.

Takeaway

The dumping occurred in **Perry County, Alabama — a rural, majority-Black county with high poverty and low political leverage**. These demographics explain why the relocation of toxic coal ash there became a **national case study in environmental racism and environmental justice**.

Sources: Census Reporter [Census Reporter](#), USAFacts [USAFacts](#), World Population Review [World Population Review](#), DataUSA [Data USA](#), VeritasX Demographics [veritasx.us](#)

In summation, I'd like to say that Perry County's water crisis is the culmination of two parallel failures that have collided into a single public-health disaster: **decades of neglected water infrastructure and years of waste dumping approved over community objections**. In Marion, residents have endured nearly a decade of brown, sediment-filled water, chronic low pressure, and recurring boil-water notices caused by aging pipes, failing pumps, and a filtration system long past its service life. At the same time, Perry County has been used as a regional dumping ground most notably through the disposal of millions of tons of out-of-state waste, including coal ash placing additional environmental burdens on a predominantly Black, low-income rural population. The recent system collapse, triggered by a power outage, pump failure, filtration damage, and a major leak, left entire neighborhoods without running water for days and forced emergency bottled-water distribution just so residents could bathe, cook, or flush toilets. For a county already carrying the weight of industrial dumping, the breakdown of its basic water system underscores a deeper pattern: communities with the least political power are asked to absorb the greatest environmental risks while receiving the least infrastructure investment. What is unfolding in Perry County is not an isolated malfunction it is the predictable outcome of systemic neglect and environmental burden-shifting, leaving residents without the most fundamental guarantee of modern life: safe, reliable water.

For additional information:

1819 News: [Marion residents raise alarm over water crisis 'Flushing toilets has become a challenge'](#)

Tuscaloosa Thread: [Daily Bottled Water Distribution In Marion Amid Water Crisis](#) MSNBC News: ['If there is no](#)

water, you can't function': Leaders working to restore
clean drinking water to Marion after outage