# The car ferry Badger must not be allowed to parlay its cachet as the last steamship operating into a pass to continue dumping toxic ash into Lake Michigan

What if 50 huge, double-axel, 10-ton-capacity dump trucks backed, one after the other, across Port Washington's south beach to the water's edge and dumped a total of one million pounds of coal ash laced with mercury, arsenic and other toxic pollutants into Lake Michigan?

Federal, state and local authorities would react ferociously. Perpetrators would be arrested. Companies involved would be fined to the point of being driven out of business. A prodigious clean-up effort would be launched. News media and the Internet would be apoplectic with outrage.

None of that reaction has occurred, but the environmental crime described in the first paragraph was actually committed this year—just not at Port Washington and not by dump trucks.

It was done, as it has been during every shipping season for years, by the car ferry Badger in the open waters of Lake Michigan: 500 tons of ash from the coal burned to fire its boilers dumped into Lake Michigan.

The Badger, which crosses the lake between Manitowoc, Wis., and Ludington, Mich., has been allowed to dump its ash overboard under a special permit issued by the Environmental Protection Agency recognizing the 60-year-old ship's historic status as the last coal-fired steamship operating in the United States.

The EPA has warned the Badger's owners for years that ash-dumping would have to stop at some point. That point has now been set at Dec. 19, 2012. The company that owns the Badger, Lake Michigan Carferry Service of Ludington, should have prepared for the deadline by converting the ship to a cleaner fuel such as natural gas. Instead, it's asking the EPA to extend the permit and trying to round up political support to be allowed to continue polluting Lake Michigan.

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker obliged by writing a letter to the EPA asking for a permit extension. "We hope the SS Badger can continue to sail," he wrote, "but we also hope they can do so in a manner that safeguards the waters of Lake Michigan."

The governor's hopes are quite baffling, not to mention contradictory, in that if the Badger continues to sail under an extended permit to dump coal ash, it cannot safeguard the waters of Lake Michigan; it can only continue to harm them.

There should be no permit extension. During its years of lake crossings, the Badger has dumped an estimated total of 3.8 million tons of toxic ash into Lake Michigan. That has to stop. The ferry's blatant acts of polluting not only damage the lake, but mock the efforts supported by citizens, lakeshore municipalities and industries to protect the quality of its water.

The fact that the Badger has a propulsion system its owners claim to be "a national mechanical engineering landmark" cannot be a license to pollute in a manner that would be tolerated of no other business.

According to the Badger's website, the vessel "offers an authentic steamship experience unmatched anywhere else." True enough—no other ship is allowed to dump coal ash in the Great Lakes.

What is sad about the Badger's failure to adapt to a world that is sensitive to the need to protect a fragile environment, beyond the harm to Lake Michigan, is that putting the Badger out of service would be a loss to many who appreciate the majesty of Lake Michigan and the opportunity to cross it on a 410-foot vessel that recalls the days when car ferries crisscrossed the lake from Milwaukee, Manitowoc and Kewaunee to Frankfort, Muskegon and Ludington on the Michigan side

The Badger should be crossing the lake at its 15.6-knot pace with boilers fired by clean fuel producing the steam to turn its 14-foot propellers.

If its owners choose not to do that, it will be a shame. But not as big a shame as continuing to dump toxic ash into Lake Michigan.