

Polluters in firing line

If South Africa implements the World Health Organisation's landmark resolutions on air pollution, the government will have to take action against polluting companies, including Eskom.



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After discussing air pollution for the first time at the World Health Assembly, the UN's health body this week adopted resolutions intended to counter the world's most serious single environmental health risk.

Every year 4.3million people die from exposure to indoor air pollution and 3.7million from outdoor air pollution.

The organisation wants governments to reduce toxic particle emissions by coal-fired power stations and diesel vehicles, both major sources of harmful fumes, by "promoting energy efficiency and expanding the use of clean and renewable energy".

The resolutions call for World Health Assembly member states to develop air-quality monitoring systems and health registries to improve recognition of all illnesses related to air pollution, and to promote clean cooking, heating and lighting technologies.

Last year a report by environmental action groups said that the South African government did not maintain its air-quality monitoring stations.

As recently as February the government said it would allow Eskom to again "postpone" meeting emission standards, as required by the Air Quality Act, at 14 of its coalfired power stations.

Data from four of six monitoring stations showed that communities in the Vaal Triangle living near Eskom's Lethabo power station, ArcelorMittal's steelworks and the Sasol petro-chemicals plant were exposed to more airborne particles than allowed, $25\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, and the WHO recommended standard of $10\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$.

The concentration of fine particles in the air in Diepkloof, Klipriver and Sebokeng was more than $60\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ In 2011.

In Sharpeville and Zamdela, in the Vaal Triangle, the exposure of people to coarse particles was more than double the national standard of $50\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$.

Residents of Secunda, Mpumalanga, near Sasol's coal-to-liquidfuel and chemical plants, were the most affected, with a coarse-particle concentration of at least $100\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$.

Rico Euripidou, a Ground Work environmental health campaigner, said yesterday that the World Health Assembly resolutions put further pressure on the government to act urgently to improve air quality.

"Air pollution from coal and diesel are particular risks as both are now known to cause cancer."

Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance co-ordinator Samson Mokoena welcomed the resolutions.

"Our health department has to get involved. It cannot say that this is an environmental matter when people are suffering from asthma, respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses because of air pollution."

Health Department spokesman Popo Maja said the department did not have programmes to deal with air pollution - "but this could change with these resolutions."

The Times

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