

Air reform is gasping for breath

By ERNEST MABUZA

● Ten years after 31 000km² of Mpumalanga Highveld was declared a priority area to combat pollution, air quality in the area remains poor, a new report says.

The Centre for Environmental Rights, Groundwork and the Highveld Environmental Justice Network published a report on the issue this week.

In 2007, former environment minister Marthinus van Schalkwyk declared the region, home to about 3.6 million people, a “priority area” under the Air Quality Act.

The CER said its conclusions were that a decade after the declaration air quality remained poor and did not comply with national ambient air quality standards.

Towns like eMalahleni, Middelburg, Secunda and Standerton are known for their poor air quality.

The area is home to 12 of Eskom’s 15 coal-fired power stations, plants like Sasol’s giant refinery in Secunda, metal smelters, mines, fertiliser and chemical producers, charcoal producers and many small industries.

The department’s air quality management plan was only published in 2012.

This week’s report – Broken Promises: The Failure of the Highveld Priority Area – said the department’s own review of the



SMOKIN’ Duvha power station in Mpumalanga belches vapour from its cooling towers. A CER report found this week that very little has been done to curb noxious emissions in the province’s industrialised Highveld a decade after it was declared a ‘priority area’ to limit pollution

Picture Lauren Mulligan/Gallo Images/Foto24

plan, published for comment in February, showed little progress had been made.

The report said it was not known if the air quality was worse because the priority area’s ambient air monitoring network had deteriorated since the declaration.

“Only five of nine stations publish timeous monthly reports,” said the report,

It also said it was difficult to assess directly whether key industries had reduced emissions, because neither the government nor industries made key data and documents publicly available for review.

The measures taken in the past 10 years to

reduce dust emissions were negligible, it said, particularly from mine activities, one of the major contributors to poor air quality.

The report said the significant air pollution meant Highveld residents were dying prematurely, and suffering from respiratory and cardiac illnesses that inhibited their prosperity and wellbeing.

Immediate steps had to be taken to reduce emissions of pollutants. It said all facilities must be required to comply with at least the minimum emission standards.

Authorities should suspend the issuing of all new emission licences until there was

consistent compliance with all national ambient air quality standards.

“Licensing of any expansion plans of existing industries must be contingent on a simultaneous substantial reduction in emissions,” the report said.

When facilities reached the end of their life, particularly coal-fired power stations, air emission licences should be withdrawn and decommissioning and rehabilitation enforced.

Dust control regulations had to be amended to ensure adequate monitoring, the CER report added.