

Lungs as dustbins

Zita Goldswain

Not only eMalahleni, but the whole of Mpumalanga is suffocating under dirty air.

New satellite data analysed by Greenpeace shows that Mpumalanga tops the chart as the world's largest Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) hotspot across six continents. NO₂ is a dangerous pollutant in and of itself and also contributes to the formation of PM_{2.5} and ozone, two of the most dangerous forms of air pollution.

"It has been reported before that the eMalahleni area has the world's dirtiest air, and now this analysis of high tech satellite data has revealed that the Mpumalanga province is the global number one hotspot for NO₂ emissions. This confirms that South Africa has the most polluting cluster of coal-fired power stations in the world which is both disturbing and very scary" said Melita Steele, senior Climate and Energy Campaign Manager for Greenpeace Africa.

The data shows that Mpumalanga is also strangling Gauteng as the regular east winds carry this polluted air across the province's borders.

Mpumalanga is home to a cluster of twelve coal fired power plants with a total capacity of over 32 gigawatts owned and operated by Eskom.

"Because South Africa's coal-belts are hidden from view for the majority of South Africans, it can be easy to pretend that they don't actually exist. The reality is that coal extraction and burning has devastating impacts on the people living in the area. This satellite data now confirms that there is nowhere to hide: Eskom's coal addiction in Mpumalanga means that millions of people living in Johannesburg and Pretoria are also impacted by the pollution from coal" continued Steele.

"Air pollution is a global health crisis, with up to 95% of the world's population breathing unsafe air. South Africa is a significant global hotspot with its high concentration of coal power stations and its weak air pollution standards. Our government urgently needs to come up with an action plan that protects millions of people, instead of dirty coal power

stations," said Steele.

"The government should also set up an action plan with concrete steps, measures and deadlines to make sure that air pollution levels in high priority areas comply with existing regulations. This means that no new coal-fired power stations can be included in the national electricity plan, unit five and six of Kusile coal power plant must be cancelled and 50 percent of current coal-fired power stations need to be decommissioned by 2030 in line with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Special Report on 1.5°C," she said. With this new data in hand Mr Bobby Peek, director groundWork, Friends of the Earth, South Africa wrote a letter to Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi. Peek explained that the Life after Coal Campaign has been working on issues of air pollution for many years and has particular health and climate change-related expertise.

"Despite the ongoing air pollution disaster in the South African coal fields and industrial heartlands, our health minister has decided against participating in the first-ever World Health Organisation (WHO) Conference on Air Pollution and Health. This is an unquantifiable set-back for the poor masses of South Africa, whose health and well-being deteriorates daily due to inhaling polluted air. The WHO has confirmed that air pollution, both ambient and indoor, is the largest cause of death worldwide," Peek said. "Unless Minister Motsoaledi and the National Department of Health take air pollution, and its associated severe public health impacts and significant climate change impacts seriously, we will be ignoring what is ostensibly the greatest public health impact we face. These are risks of national, regional, and global interest for all present and future generations, and we disregard them at our peril. We call on our minister of health to demonstrate leadership and actively engage in the management and abatement of air pollution in South Africa and to engage directly with community people whose health and wellbeing is affected on a daily basis," Peek said.