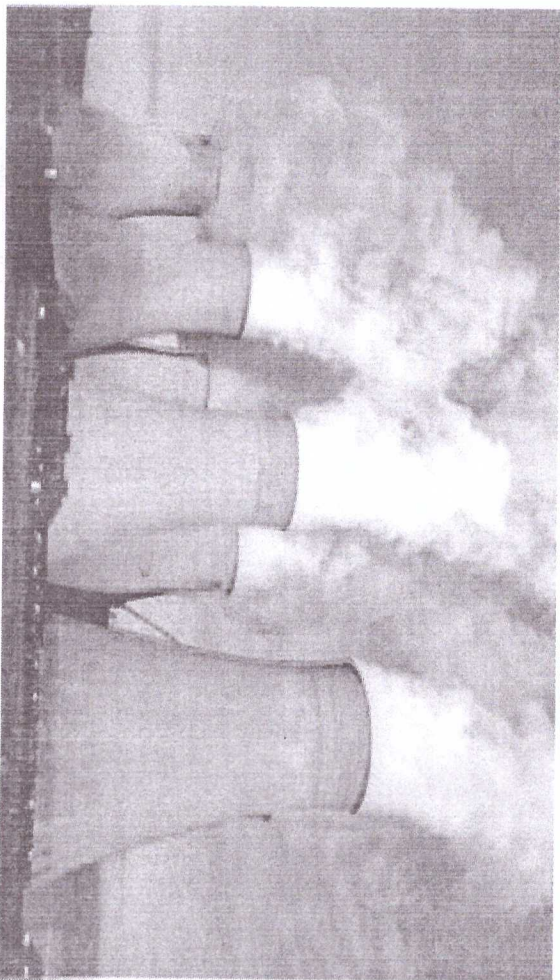


# Air quality in the highveld remains poor; says report

“The situation in the Highveld is not getting any better, pollution levels are high”



According to the report, non compliance to minimum standards emissions by the power utility and industries results into poor air quality which has a negative impact on the health and lives of the people living in the Highveld Priority Area (HPA).

Lucas Shongwe

The inability of government to enforce minimum emissions standards in the Highveld Priority Area (HPA) means that air quality remains poor and has adverse impact on the health and wellbeing of the people living in the priority area, said a report released by Centre for Environmental Rights, Highveld Environmental Justice Network and GroundWorks.

The report entitled Broken Promises: the Failure of the Highveld Priority Area released in October last year suggests that HPA residents are dying prematurely, and suffering from respiratory and cardiac illnesses due to high levels of air pollution. In 2007 the Minister of Environmental Affairs declared 31 000 square kilometres of the heavily-polluted Mpumalanga Highveld a priority area in terms of the Air Quality Act. The Highveld Priority Area (HPA) was created because, as the DEA said at the time, 'people living and working in these areas do not enjoy air quality that is not harmful to their health and well-being.'

Ten years after the declaration was made, air quality in priority areas remains poor and there is no compliance with health-based national ambient air quality standards (NAAQS).

The report estimates that coal fired power stations alone attributes to 2 239 deaths a year, 94 680 days of asthma symptoms, 9 533 cases of bronchitis in children. It also estimated that 996 628 working days were lost, nearly four million days of restricted activity, all at a cost of US\$2,3 billion a year.

The report also found that health-based standards representing acceptable exposures to pollution exceeded the World Health Organization's (WHO's) recommended limits in most parts of the country particularly in priority areas. This would only mean that South Africans are not breathing "safe" levels of pollution.

NAAQS were developed and published in 2009 and 2012 respectively. The 2009 NAAQS40 relate to sulphur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>), nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>), carbon monoxide (CO), ozone (O<sub>3</sub>), particulate matter (PM) with a diameter of 10 or less micrometres (PM<sub>10</sub>), Lead (Pb) and benzene (C<sub>6</sub>H<sub>6</sub>).

Prior to January 2015, weaker NAAQS applied for PM<sub>10</sub> and benzene. The Minister set increasingly strict

NAAQS in order to achieve progressive reduction in atmospheric pollutants.

"The situation in the Highveld is not getting any better, pollution levels are high," said Environment activist Thomas Mnguni from GroundWorks in Middelburg.

"If the levels are high, what is then going to happen to the health of the people in the Highveld? It means more people are going to get sick. That is a direct co-relation between poor-air quality and health," he said.

In 2015 Eskom and Sasol were permitted postponements of compliance with minimum emission standards. This is a decision by government which Mnguni said is "a total disregard of the environment revolution and which makes it very difficult to reduce air pollution in the affected areas".