

Mokonyane's deadly law breach could kill thousands in Mpumalanga

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Steam rises from the cooling towers of the Matla power station, a coal-fired power plant operated by Eskom in Mpumalanga. Picture: Siphwe Sibeko/Reuters/African News Agency (ANA)

Johannesburg - Doubling air pollution standards for sulphur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>), proposed by former environmental affairs minister Nomvula Mokonyane in May, would cause thousands of deaths on Mpumalanga's Highveld.

This is according to a study conducted by Lauri Myllyvirta, lead analyst at Greenpeace's global air pollution unit, which shows how, over time, an estimated 3300 premature deaths would be caused by doubling the SO<sub>2</sub> standard, as a result of increased risk of lower respiratory infections, increased risk of stroke and increased risk of death from diabetes - with around 1000 of these premature deaths estimated in Gauteng.

Myllyvirta's study, which focuses only on the health impacts as a consequence of doubling the limit for SO<sub>2</sub> emissions from power plants in South Africa, estimates that 950 of the 3300 premature deaths over the years to come, will be due to increased risk of lower respiratory infections, including in young children.

The Life After Coal (LAC)/Impilo Ngaphandle Kwamalahle campaign, a joint campaign by the Centre for Environmental Rights (CER), groundWork and Earthlife Africa Johannesburg, together with four community-based organisations, have submitted comments, objecting to the SO<sub>2</sub> proposal.

“The LAC and its community-based partners argue that it would be plainly unlawful for government to weaken the minimum emission standard, which were set more than nine years ago to reduce the detrimental impacts caused by air pollutants such as SO<sub>2</sub>.”

In October last year, Mokonyane published the doubled SO<sub>2</sub> MES limit without having invited public comment, as the Air Quality Act requires.

In April 2019 groundWork instituted litigation to set aside the unlawful notice. In May, the minister withdrew the unlawful notice and gave the public 30 days to comment.

This amendment would allow all coal-fired boilers to emit double their previously allowed SO<sub>2</sub> pollution from April 1, 2020, including Eskom and Sasol, South Africa’s biggest emitters of SO<sub>2</sub>.

“Eskom’s coal-fired power stations and Sasol’s coal boilers are all located in South Africa’s air pollution priority areas - the Highveld Priority Area, the Vaal Triangle Airshed Priority Area, and the Waterberg-Bojanala Priority Area - declared as such due to the already-deadly levels of air pollution in these areas.”

Doubling the already-lax SO<sub>2</sub> MES, would make these around 10 times weaker than the equivalent standard in India and 28 times weaker than the equivalent standard in China.

SO<sub>2</sub> emissions also contribute to the secondary formation of a pollutant called fine particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub>), with expert research showing that it is causally linked to a number of severe conditions, including lung cancer.

“By reducing exposure to these pollutants, the MES exist to protect constitutional rights - weakening the SO<sub>2</sub> limit undermines this legitimate purpose and cannot be justified,” said Robyn Hugo, attorney and head of the CER’s pollution and climate change programme.

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