

The lackluster enforcement of emission laws is killing people and jobs

By Annerie Weber – DA Shadow Deputy Minister of Forestry, Fisheries and Environmental Affairs

The people of the Highveld area in Mpumalanga are angry, frustrated, disillusioned and unhealthy.

Their Constitutional rights are being violated, the Constitution states that: *“Everyone has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being and; to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations through reasonable legislative and other measures that 1. Prevent pollution and ecological degradation;”*

However, people living in the Highveld area of Mpumalanga are surrounded by 12 polluting coal-fired power plants owned by Eskom. Last year, Greenpeace announced that Mpumalanga is the global number one hotspot for Nitrogen Dioxide emissions, due to these plants. Nitrogen Dioxide is a dangerous pollutant which is estimated to have caused between 300-650 deaths in this area in 2016 alone.

Back in 2007, this area was declared the Highveld Priority Area as it was identified as one of the hotspots of poor air quality. Five years later, the then Environmental Affairs Minister published an air quality management plan. In 2019, another 7 years later, very little has been done to change the deadly air quality of the Highveld, as people are suffering and dying. After full 12 years of delivering nothing meaningful, the government has failed to improve the deadly levels of air pollution, and as a result the Highveld suffers from the most dangerous air pollution in SA.

The residents of eMalahleni are angry and rightfully frustrated by promises and plans made, with no implementation, execution or enforcement of these plans. The violators and polluters have faced zero consequences for blatantly disregarding the environmental laws of their own companies. I am disappointed and angry with government for not enforcing and ensuring these companies are kept accountable to the basic standard of compliance.

Dr Gray, an expert in air and health risk modelling, said that *“Humans exposure to toxic chemical compounds emitted by the coal plants, results in chronic respiratory illnesses such as asthma, bronchitis, and lung cancer and contributes to strokes, heart attacks, birth defects and premature deaths”*. This is an absolute gross violation of the residents’ constitutional right of an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being.

The people who suffer are 14-year-old Tumelo who misses school regularly due to ill health and struggling to breathe. Or her next-door neighbour, Lifa Pelican, who uses an inhaler a couple of times during the day. His respiratory problems started when he moved to eMalahleni. Tumelo and Lifa's health problems stop when they visit family who live far from the Highveld.

The tragedy is that residents are stuck in this toxic area because this is where they can find employment. But at what cost? It is important to consider the impact of health on unemployment. Workers that are consistently sick, are absent from work and eventually lose their jobs. When you live in the Highveld and have respiratory problems, the doctor advises you to leave town. The problem here is that people then have to choose between an income and their health which is a very unfair situation: how do you choose between immediate survival from a job, versus your health and long-term survival?

In 2017/18 there were 120 government owned air quality monitoring stations that were reporting on SAAQIS. But what is the use of spending resources on reporting on air quality and monitoring it if there is no accountability in the enforcing and execution of the big polluters?

We as the Highveld of Mpumalanga are asking the government to do their job and enforce compliance with the law and reduce air-pollution in the coal-rich Highveld of Mpumalanga.