

OPEN LETTER TO ESKOM'S CEO, COLLIN MATJILA

Earthlife Africa Johannesburg
groundWork (Friends of the Earth South Africa)
Centre for Environmental Rights

3 July 2014

Dear Mr Matjila

In Eskom's response to the *Mail & Guardian* article¹ "How Eskom's coal kills" dated 20 June 2014,² Eskom stated that the bulk of the 2006 health impact reports commissioned by Eskom (and released to the Centre for Environmental Rights pursuant to a request under the Promotion of Access to Information Act) was based on two power stations that were never built. Eskom's spokesperson Andrew Etzinger is quoted as saying that the study is "outdated and does not reflect reality" and that does not include "the environmental mitigations that we have put in place to reduce the impact".

These statements are erroneous and misleading.

In fact, the reports were commissioned when Eskom only operated 10 coal-fired power stations, although in some places of the report it is made mention of future power stations. Since then, Eskom has commissioned or recommissioned a further three coal-fired power stations, and is building two of the world's largest coal-fired power stations. These health impact reports clearly indicate the causal relationship between premature death, serious illness and exposure to emissions from Eskom's power stations. Coal's death toll could only have been exacerbated by the emissions from the additional coal-fired power stations.

The report on the Mpumalanga Highveld, prepared when Eskom only operated eight power stations in Mpumalanga, clearly distinguishes between the impacts of current and future operations. This document states:

"current Eskom power stations were cumulatively calculated to be responsible for 17 non-accidental mortalities per year and 661 respiratory hospital submissions... Power stations contributing most significantly to risks related to Eskom's current operations were identified as being Kendal (61%), Matla (20%), Lethabo (8%) and Kriel (7%). Together, these four power stations contributed over 95% of the non-accidental mortality cases and respiratory hospital admissions predicted to occur as a result of Eskom Power Stations".

Mr Matjila, to repeat the simple truth, Eskom's own documentation states unequivocally that Eskom's polluting power stations are killing people.

Eight years down the line, with five more power stations (once Medupi and Kusile are operational) and several new independent coal-fired power stations under development, Eskom are therefore correct that the reports' figures are outdated. However, the current situation is now much worse.

1 <http://www.iol.co.za/business/companies/eskom-disputes-pollution-report-1.1706724#.U6afDvmeCYE>.

2 <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-06-19-power-stations-are-deadly-internal-report-reveals>

A recent Greenpeace report, published this year, indicates that Eskom's sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter (10 micro-millimetres) have increased since 2002 by 44%, 22% and 74% respectively in the Mpumalanga region. Furthermore, a new study by groundWork indicates that 51% of deaths due to respiratory illness and 54% deaths due to cardiovascular disease, related to outdoor pollution in the area, can be attributed to Eskom.

We are astounded that Eskom ask us to focus our attention to what Eskom is doing towards mitigating the impacts of coal, when Eskom are applying for rolling postponements or exemptions from compliance with air emission standards for 14 of Eskom's 15 coal-fired power stations, including the Medupi giant, and requesting relaxed limits on existing permits at a number of stations. Eskom is requesting leeway to pollute at even higher levels and, thus, kill and cause serious illnesses for at least the next two decades.

Mr Matjila, Eskom could spend money to clean up its power stations, but has decided that it is more cost-effective to continue poisoning people.

As soon as Eskom publicised its intention to seek these postponements, we, and other interested and affected parties, highlighted the importance of any such applications being accompanied by health impact assessments. But Eskom refused to do this, stating in Eskom's Background Information Document that power station emissions do not harm human health; and then arguing in the applications themselves that their impacts on human health were "negligible" – this despite incontrovertible international research demonstrating the significant health impact of emissions from coal-fired power generation.

In addition, Eskom failed to disclose – let alone to make available as part of its applications – the findings of the two previous health impact assessments in its possession. In this regard, we are aware that the Department of Environmental Affairs (DEA) has required Eskom to provide additional information before its applications can be further processed, and that health-related information is amongst the information required.

The 2006 reports Eskom commissioned reveal significant health impacts, and make clear that Eskom is legally required to conduct detailed, cumulative and comprehensive health impact assessments on the impacts of its postponement applications. Given Eskom's failure to do so, we will make these health impact reports commissioned by Eskom available to the National Air Quality Officer, as they clearly contain relevant information that must be considered in deciding the applications.

Whether it is 20,000 or 20 people who die annually because of electricity produced from coal, the Constitution commands that every single South African has the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health.

In Eskom's efforts to quell any resistance, Eskom attempts, in the *Mail & Guardian* article, to suggest that the energy utility will electrify more households on the basis that indoor burning of coal is a more significant factor to ill-health. We agree it is an important factor but it is not the only factor affecting people's health. The study by groundWork shows that pollution from Eskom's electricity generation is the primary driver of outdoor pollution related illness in the Highveld Priority Area (HPA), having three times more the impact on people's health compared to outdoor pollution from domestic coal burning. People do not remain indoors. Pollution from Eskom is severely impacting people's health and needs to be addressed urgently, otherwise you will have electrified all the homes and people in the HPA will still be sick and dying.

This letter is sent by the following organisations:

Earthlife Africa Johannesburg
Director, Tristen Taylor

Centre for Environmental Rights
Executive Director, Melissa Fourie

groundWork
Director, Bobby Peek