



PRESS RELEASE

UK parliament urged to recognise health costs of coal

Brussels, 2 December 2013 – New figures on the harm to health in the United Kingdom associated with air pollution from coal-fired power plants have been released today by the Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL).

British coal power plants cause 1,600 premature deaths, 68,000 additional days of medication, 363,266 working days lost each year and more than a million incidents of lower respiratory symptoms, according to an expert assessment commissioned by HEAL. (1)

The timing of the release coincides with an important debate on the future of coal power generation taking place in the House of Commons on Wednesday. A vote on the energy bill will decide whether a House of Lords' amendment is upheld setting targets on greenhouse gas emission reductions for old coal power stations. The setting of carbon emissions standards is needed to hasten the clean-up of plants that are both important polluters and major contributors to climate change. (2)

The new figures quantifying the health impact in the UK of coal burning to create electricity are published today as part of a wider project which shows the unpaid burden of coal on public health in Europe. HEAL's main report published earlier this year entitled, "*The Unpaid Health Bill, How coal power plants make us sick*" (3) estimated total health costs in the European Union at up to €43 billion per year. The UK health costs were estimated at £1.1 to 3.1 billion (€1.3 to 3.7 billion) per year, ranking number six among EU member states.

"Rapidly growing evidence of how coal affects air pollution and our health is pushing this issue onto centre stage in the energy debate (4)," says Genon Jensen, Executive Director, Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL). "Our report has had a great response from energy ministers and health professionals who are increasingly aware that coal is costly for public health. The time is now ripe to bring the health facts and figures into national debates and cost assessments. Wednesday's vote in the UK offers a unique opportunity to cash in huge health co-benefits."

The briefing by HEAL further highlights the contribution of coal to EU carbon emissions, and the urgent need to tackle climate change from a health perspective. Climate change impacts are estimated to be already causing 400,000 deaths each year worldwide (5). The summer heat wave of 2003, which can be seen as a foretaste of climatic changes in Europe, led to 2,045 excess deaths in England and Wales within two weeks. (6)

Quotes from leading public health experts supporting efforts to reduce Europe's use of coal

Dr Michal Krzyzanowski, visiting professor at King's College London and formerly with the European Centre for Environment & Health (ECEH) of the World Health Organization, says: "The scientific evidence that air pollution causes disease is no longer in doubt. Ambient air pollution is

recognised as a leading determinant of health globally and in Western Europe – and coal combustion is an important source of this pollution. Energy policy must seriously consider the significant health costs resulting from the use of coal.”

Professor Paul Wilkinson, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) says: “The external costs to health from coal power generation are among the largest of any form of electricity production, and reflect a substantial current public health burden. The costs of reducing greenhouse gases by reducing coal powered generation would be partially paid back because of lower health costs.”

Isobel Braithwaite, a fourth-year medical student at University College London, who coordinates the student group Healthy Planet UK, thinks we need to phase out coal as quickly as possible. “Coal creates a double health burden,” she says. “The air pollution it produces is harming people’s health directly - particularly children and patients with pre-existing lung problems, like asthma. But it is also storing up health problems for the future, especially for today’s younger generation, because coal contributes substantially to carbon emissions and we know that climate change threatens health. I think renewable energy is a much better option all round.”

Notes

1. HEAL briefing, December 2013, “What does coal cost health in the United Kingdom?”, www.env-health.org
2. Old coal power plants are also expected to either retrofit or close down when the new EU Industrial Emissions Directive comes into effect in January 2016. Retrofitting old coal-fired power stations aims to reduce air pollution alongside lower carbon emissions.
3. HEAL report, “The Unpaid health bill, How coal power plants make us sick” was launched in Brussels in March 2013. Translations of the report were subsequently launched in Germany and Poland. <http://www.env-health.org/policies/climate-and-energy/coal-s-unpaid-health-bill-220/>
4. Coal received substantial attention at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP19) talks in Warsaw this month. Ed Davey, UK energy and climate minister, joined positions already taken by the US and Nordic countries when he told the international climate talks that Britain would no longer be supporting subsidies for coal power plants in developing countries.

Christina Figueres, chief UN climate spokesperson, told a meeting during COP19 organised by the coal industry that ‘most coal must stay in the ground’. “The fumes from burning fossil fuel are loading the atmosphere with greenhouse gases, competing for water resources and harming public health,” she said. Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/most-coal-must-stay-in-the-ground-un-climate-chief-christiana-figueres-says-20131119-2xrto.html#ixzz2lwLqu7O2>
5. [DARA Climate Vulnerability Monitor](#)
6. Kovats, S., Wolf, T. and Menne, B. (2004): Heat wave of August 2003 in Europe: provisional estimates of the impact of mortality. *Eurosurveillance Weekly*, 8(11) <http://www.eurosurveillance.org/ViewArticle.aspx?ArticleId=2409>

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The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) is a leading European not-for-profit organisation addressing how the environment affects health in the European Union (EU). With the support of more than 65 member organisations, HEAL brings independent expertise and evidence from the health community to different decision-making processes. Our broad alliance represents health professionals, not-for-profit health insurers, doctors, nurses, cancer and asthma groups, citizens, women’s groups, youth groups, environmental NGOs, scientists and public health research institutes. Members include international and Europe-wide organisations, as well as national and local groups. Website: www.env-health.org