

Medical Officers of Health call for end to Ontario's coal-fired power plants

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The Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) today called on the provincial government to phase-out its five coal-fired power plants to help meet Kyoto greenhouse gas reduction targets and fight toxic air pollution at the same time.

"The public health sector is calling for the phase-out of coal fired power plants because they are significant emitters of the air pollutants that contribute to climate change, smog, acid rain, and mercury contamination of the aquatic food chain," said Helen Doyle, member of the OPHA Environmental Health Work Group.

Last year, government-owned Ontario Power Generation's five coal plants emitted 20% of all the greenhouse gases generated in the province. Emissions from the five plants represent more than three-quarters (78%) of all the greenhouse gases that Ontario would need to cut in order to attain the 6% reduction required by the Kyoto Protocol.

The electricity market restructuring now underway gives Ontario an opportunity to help secure clean air, safe water, uncontaminated food and a sustainable ecosystem to hand down to our children, the OPHA said.

"While we are concerned about all four environmental issues associated with coal-fired power plants, the one that drives our call for the phase-out is climate change," said Dr. David McKeown, Medical Officer of Health for Peel Region.

"The phase-out of coal-fired power plants has been shown to be one of the most cost-effective means for cutting greenhouse gases. It is also an action that produces a number of significant environmental and public health co-benefits," said Dr. Monir Taha, Associate Medical Officer of Health for the City of Hamilton.

Climate change is resulting in more frequent and intense heat waves, more smog episodes, more prairie droughts, more forest fires, more tornadoes and extreme weather events, decreased water levels in the Great Lakes, permafrost melting in the far north, and changes in fish populations.

"The weather this summer has given us a taste of what is to come with climate change," said Dr. McKeown.

Ontario experienced one of the hottest summers on record this year, with temperatures exceeding 30 degrees C for 40 days, and an extraordinary number of smog alerts. It was also one of the driest summers this century with rainfall dropping to 130 mm, compared to a normal level of 217 mm.

Among the health impacts of climate change that the officials cited were:

- Increases in deaths from heat waves. Projections indicate that Ontario and Quebec could experience a five-fold increase in heat waves with a doubling of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. These heat waves could result in between 239 and 835 excess deaths in a city with Toronto's population.
- Increases in deaths and disease from air pollution. It has been predicted that smog episodes could occur on about one quarter of summer days with a doubling of carbon dioxide.
- Increases in insect-borne diseases. It has been predicted that insect-borne diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, yellow fever and viral encephalitis could spread into Canada with increases in temperature and humidity.

"The question is not, 'Do we sign the Kyoto Protocol?' but rather 'How do we implement the Kyoto Protocol in the most effective and least disruptive way,'" said Dr. Taha.

The physicians noted that energy efficiency, industrial co-generation of electricity and steam, and renewable electricity generation using wind, small hydro and biogas have the potential to more than replace all the coal-fired electricity now on the grid.

"With the restructuring of Ontario's electricity sector, the province has the opportunity to shift this sector of our economy away from fossil fuels towards sustainable energy technologies and practices," said Dr. Liana Nolan, Waterloo Region Medical Officer of Health.

"Governments need to switch their subsidies from fossil fuel producers to renewable energy producers," she said.

The OPHA is recommending that:

- The federal government ratify and implement the Kyoto Protocol;
- The federal and provincial governments establish regulation that phase-out coal-fired power plants by 2010;
- The provincial government ensure that electric utilities can profit from energy efficiency programs that reduce electricity consumption and their customers' bills;
- The provincial government require all electric utilities to provide some electricity that is generated from renewable sources; and
- Municipalities establish ambitious energy efficiency programs.

The OPHA is a non-profit organization that represents many of the staff working in public health units and community health centres across this province.

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