



**Ontario Public Health Association**  
l'Association pour la santé publique de l'Ontario  
Established/Établi 1949

**Presentation to the Ontario  
Legislature's  
Standing Committee on  
General Government**

***Bill 9, Environmental Protection Act  
(Ending Coal for Cleaner Air Act),  
2015***

***October 7, 2015***

## Opening Remarks

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before your committee. My name is Pegeen Walsh and I am the Executive Director of the Ontario Public Health Association.

Our non-profit, non-partisan association brings together those committed to improving people's health from the public and community health, academic, voluntary and private sector. Many of our members, be they public health nurses, inspectors, nutritionists, doctors, planners, health promoters, epidemiologists or environmental health managers are working on the front lines to protect and improve public health in their communities.

I am also the Co-Chair of EcoHealth Ontario, a collaborative of professionals in the fields of public health, medicine, education, planning and the environment. We are working together to better understand the relationships between the environment and health and increase the quality and diversity of the urban and rural spaces in which we live.

## The Health Impacts of Burning Coal

The Ontario Public Health Association has been a champion for healthy public policy since its creation over 66 years ago. We are committed to strategies focussed on prevention, health protection and promotion. As such, we are supportive of the amendments outlined in Bill 9 as they represent an important step in reaching our goal of a healthier province. The major determinants of health transcend the health care system, including the environment in which Ontarians live. We therefore encourage governments to consider health in all policies and take efforts to protect Ontarians.

OPHA, along with many other health and environment groups, advocated for the elimination of coal fired plants for over a decade. In our 2002 report entitled, "*Beyond Coal: Power, Public Health, and the Environment*", we called on the Ontario Government to phase out coal-fired power plants. We also recommended that Ontario establish a shared savings plan to reward utilities for investing in energy efficiency programs and encourage policies which reduce emissions from non-renewable fuel sources.

With the greater availability and sources of clean, renewable energy, Ontario no longer has the need for the burning of coal as a source of electricity. While the phasing out of coal may now seem like old news, I would like to review why these changes were so important given that there are still jurisdictions that are burning coal. My remarks can also serve as a reminder that we can tackle challenging health and environmental issues when different sectors come together and cross party support is achieved.

Coal burning has been proven as one of the major contributors to pollution and greenhouse gasses (OMOE, 2005). Aside from the immediate harms this brings to human health, it can also speed the rate of global warming and climate change which has grave consequences. Back in

2002, we recognized the importance of reducing greenhouse gasses; since then, research and new evidence has underscored the urgency.

Coal continues to represent an enormous burden on the climate and air quality; The David Suzuki Foundation reports that just one 150-megawatt coal-fired power plant can produce more than a million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions per year. That's about the same as 200,000 cars produce.

Burning coal produces large quantities of chemical matter which can cause breathing and respiratory problems, irritation, inflammation, damage to the lungs, and premature death. Air quality affects not only individuals with heart and breathing problems but also pregnant women, the very young and the elderly.

The chemicals released into the air can also result in acid rain which can have drastic ecological impacts on lakes by changing the water's acidity, making them uninhabitable for fish, plants and animals (Environment Canada, 2013). Coal-fired power is also a leading source of mercury emissions in North America, which are dangerous to people and wildlife.

Climate change resulting from the burning of coal has a strong impact on human health. As the climate changes, it brings tropical weather to higher latitudes; tropical diseases like West Nile virus and Lyme disease will follow. Ecosystem disruption will make the outbreak of water-borne diseases more likely as well. Studies also show that warmer temperatures drive up pollen counts, which worsen symptoms of allergy sufferers (David Suzuki Foundation).

Other health impacts expected from climate change include increases in heat waves, air pollution, and extreme weather events such as tornados and floods. Indirectly, health impacts expected include increases in drought, changes to water and food supplies, and increases in the range of vector-borne and infectious diseases.

## **Conclusion**

With the phase-out of coal-fired power plants in Ontario, the province has seen significant reductions in emissions, major improvements in air quality, and human health (Beck, Gerasimchuk, & Harris, 2015). By ensuring coal burning is banned as a source of electricity, we can help reduce health care costs, minimize future environmental damage and install a protective barrier to regressive energy policy. The Ontario Clean Air Alliance (Cundiff, 2015) has noted that the phasing out of coal has shown that “it is possible to take meaningful action on climate change and air quality without stalling economic growth or lowering quality of life”.

As a society, we tend to be reactive rather than proactive. It costs less to prevent health and environmental problems than it does to treat them. OPHA encourages the legislature to pass Bill 9 as an insurance measure. We welcome the opportunity to work with legislators on proactive initiatives that address climate change, land use planning, green spaces, air quality and industrial and vehicle emissions.

We can't afford not to act when it comes to safeguarding the determinants of our health. Thank you for the opportunity to convey the ideas and concerns of our association.

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## About OPHA

*Created in 1949, the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA) is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that brings together a broad spectrum of groups and individuals concerned about people's health. OPHA's members come from various backgrounds and sectors - from the various disciplines in public health, health care, academic, non-profit to the private sector. They are united by OPHA's mission of providing leadership on issues affecting the public's health and strengthening the impact of people, who are active in public and community health throughout Ontario. This mission is achieved through professional development, information and analysis on issues effecting community and public health, access to multidisciplinary networks, advocacy on health public policy and the provision of expertise and consultation.*

*OPHA members have been leading change in their communities on a wide range of issues - tobacco control, poverty reduction, diabetes prevention, increased access to oral health care, immunization, supporting children and families, food security, healthy eating and nutrition, climate change and designing walkable communities, among others.*