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MEDIA RELEASE

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Health groups call for coal and health inquiry in light of new pollution data

The massive increases in particle pollution from coal sources reported in the latest annual National Pollutant Inventory (NPI) report pose a serious threat to the health of communities, the national coalition of health groups, the Climate and Health Alliance, said today.

Air pollution is one of the leading causes of cancer, and the latest NPI report shows dangerous particle pollution from the coal industry has dramatically increased, as coal mining and production expands across the country.

“The latest figures are sobering,” said Dr Liz Hanna, Climate and Health Alliance President, and Australian National University climate and health researcher.

“Our recent report on coal and health in the Hunter Valley shows there is a \$600 million per annum health damages bill from coal fired power stations in the region.

“Air pollution from coal sources affecting the towns of Singleton and Muswellbrook causes health damages worth \$65.3 million each year. The national costs are far higher.

“These costs are already staggering, and yet the new NPI figures reveal pollution is getting much worse.”

“It is concerning that we have yet another wind farm inquiry underway, when an industry that is causing demonstrable harm to health is not being investigated. We should have a national Inquiry into the health risks from coal in Australia.”

Health risks are associated with both short and long-term exposure to air pollution, Dr Hanna said, with fossil fuels such as coal and oil (combusted for electricity and transport) among the biggest culprits.

In particular, fine particles known as PM2.5 can travel deep into the lungs and cross into the blood stream, where they cause heart attacks and stroke. Air pollution containing these particles is currently unregulated, other than a reporting standard, and no measures are in place to punish major polluters.

“There are regulations and consequences, such as fines and remediation measures, when other forms of pollution occur,” Dr Hanna said.

“Given the risks to health from air pollution – responsible for thousands of deaths in Australia each year and the source of many illnesses and hospital admissions – we ask two questions. Firstly, why do these not apply to activities that pollute the air? Secondly, where is the political will to fund studies that fully investigate the health and societal costs of this toxic industry?”

“Reducing air pollution from all sources is a major public health measure, and must be a priority,” Dr Hanna said.

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