

CASE STUDY 4

CONTROLLING AIR POLLUTION

Statement from the State of Environment report

“Urban air quality is a significant cause of death and illness. There is a statistically significant relationship between higher levels of fine particles and respiratory and cardiovascular disease, and increased mortality.”

Failure of the current system

Air pollution causes the death of over 3000 Australians a year – almost three times the national road toll – and leads to disease and disability in tens of thousands more. Pollutants such as fine particle pollution (PM2.5) sulphur dioxide and oxides of nitrogen cause a range of health impacts such as cancer, heart attack, stroke, asthma, lung damage and poor lung development in children. Air pollution from coal-fired power stations alone has been estimated to cost \$2.6 billion a year in health costs.

Communities have little control over the air they breathe – they rely on strong regulation to protect their health. However the Australian system for setting national pollution standards is no longer working. National standards for air pollution are currently determined by complex and outdated arrangements between Commonwealth, state and territory governments. Even once made, national standards are not binding on States, leaving each jurisdiction to regulate as it sees fit. A 2011 review concluded that Australia’s existing pollution laws “are not meeting the requirement for adequate protection of human health”.

How the new system will help communities and nature

There are health benefits for every tonne of pollution that is not emitted and benefits continue to increase as pollution lowers. Communities see immediate benefits from reduced pollution, such as fewer asthma attacks and hospital presentations, as well as reduction in disease and death generated from long-term exposures.



New national environmental laws should include power for the Commonwealth to make national pollution standards that are binding on all jurisdictions. Standards should be set by the independent Commission in a way that adequately protects human health and the environment, with enforcement of the standards conducted by the new National EPA. This would overcome much of the unacceptable delay in making national standards, and the inconsistent protection of communities between different states.