Sulfur Dioxide Threatens Our Health

A large part of Allegheny County fails to meet federal safe air standards because of high levels of sulfur dioxide pollution. Several large polluters in Allegheny County are responsible for spewing sulfur dioxide over our homes and schools—the largest is the Cheswick coal-fired power plant in Springdale, followed by three U.S. Steel facilities including the Clairton Coke Works.

Sulfur dioxide pollution triggers asthma attacks, difficulty breathing and respiratory illness. Exposure to sulfur dioxide pollution for as little as five minutes can make it hard for a person to breathe and high levels can send people to the emergency room. This is especially dangerous for the nearly 10 percent of Allegheny County residents who suffer from asthma, especially the nearly 25,000 kids with pediatric asthma.

Coal Plants Are the Largest Source of Sulfur Dioxide

Coal burning plants like Cheswick are the largest sources of dangerous sulfur dioxide pollution in the nation. Even though the Cheswick plant installed technology to cut its sulfur dioxide pollution, it still poses a threat to our health. This is because it’s still allowed to pollute at levels that can cause air quality violations in surrounding communities. Its air pollution permit fails to require the plant to adequately operate its sulfur dioxide controls, so it fails to protect our families’ health.

Cleaning Up Our Air

Our Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) can force these polluters to clean up their act. In fact, under the Clean Air Act, ACHD is required to create a plan that will bring our air into compliance with federal safe air standards. This could mean setting stronger pollution limits for the Cheswick coal plant and other large, industrial sources in our region. With stronger limits, the plant will be forced to use and maintain the life-saving technology it already has in order to limit sulfur dioxide emissions.

At the same time, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) needs to take similar action to cut pollution from dangerous coal plants across Western and Central Pennsylvania. While the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has declared parts of Allegheny, Beaver, Indiana and Armstrong Counties as failing to meet safe air standards, they neglected to classify the remaining 90 percent of the state, which means many more areas could be at risk.
Pennsylvania must address the dangers of sulfur dioxide pollution everywhere. In order to do so, they should use the most advanced science and technology available to model how pollution travels, not solely rely on an outdated and inadequate system of air monitors that only measure pollution in some areas.

Along with our Department of Environmental Protection, the Allegheny County Health Department must take action to strengthen sulfur dioxide limits for major polluters, and clean up the air we breathe.

Take Action

- Sign our petition at sc.org/pabeyondcoal
- Write a letter to your local newspaper demanding stronger limits on sulfur dioxide pollution
- Join us by contacting randy.francisco@sierraclub.org