Consumers Energy generates the majority of its electricity from fossil fuels, increasingly costly and polluting energy sources that significantly impact human health. Pollution from coal plants includes dangerous toxins like nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide and mercury. High levels of exposure to these emissions can cause irritation of the throat and lungs, leading to difficulty breathing, increased asthma symptoms, more respiratory illnesses and cardiovascular disease.

According to the American Lung Association, more than 28,000 children and nearly 92,000 adults suffer from asthma in Western Michigan. For those individuals and others with respiratory conditions, a bad air day represents an especially dangerous threat to their health. Consumers Energy’s JH Campbell coal plant in West Olive, with aging units from 1962 and 1967, is a major contributor to the pollution in West Michigan. Every year the JH Campbell coal plant contributes to 67 deaths, 110 heart attacks, 1,100 asthma attacks, 49 hospital admissions, 40 chronic bronchitis cases, and 65 asthma emergency room visits.

Burning coal also produces a waste product called coal ash, the toxic by-product that is left over after the coal is burned. Consumers Energy’s Karn-Weadock coal plant, which sits at the mouth of the Saginaw River along the shoreline in Hampton Township, Mich., has two coal ash landfills that have been leaking high levels of toxic arsenic, boron and phosphorus into the Saginaw Bay for years, the source of 34,000 Bay City residents’ drinking water.

A CHEAPER, SAFER WAY
Consumers Energy needs to create a transition plan that includes retiring aging, polluting coal-burning units at the JH Campbell plant, while helping address the needs of displaced employees, and expanding clean energy investments to power the community. Instead of wasting electricity customer dollars to extend the life of outdated JH Campbell coal plant units, Consumers Energy should instead shift those investments to renewable energy & energy efficiency.

Expanding Consumers Energy’s use of fossil fuel-free renewable energy benefits ratepayers and shareholders in many ways. Making these investments reduces the risk that rates will spike as fossil-fuel prices continue to rise, improving reliability and reducing transmission loss. Across the United States, the falling cost of renewable sources like wind and solar have prompted other utilities to move beyond minimum clean energy requirements and take advantage of lower-cost clean energy technology.
Instead of propping up old coal plants, Consumers Energy can become an industry leader in clean energy for Michigan. Moving beyond coal benefits Consumers Energy’s ratepayers and shareholders alike, while also contributing to the booming clean energy industry. Drawing more energy from clean sources like wind and solar reduces pollution to the Great Lakes and our air across Michigan, and saves ratepayers on their monthly electricity bills. Increasingly, Consumers Energy’s customers, from the City of Grand Rapids to the Kellogg Company, are committing to renewable energy and efficiency measures, as well as reducing their carbon footprint. Consumers Energy should support their customers by substantially increasing their commitment to clean energy power.

**SMOG DANGERS**

Air pollution from burning coal also includes nitrous oxides, which react with sunlight to create smog pollution. While smog high up in the atmosphere helps protect us from the sun’s radiation, ground-level smog is dangerous for humans to breathe. The air quality monitor in Allegan County has repeatedly violated the standard that the federal government has deemed safe for human health, and continuously measures the highest smog levels in the state. Moreover, the federal government recently proposed to further strengthen the federal smog standards because evidence shows that the current standard is not adequate to protect human health, according to the EPA. Smog-related health impacts range from decreased lung function and increased respiratory symptoms, often leading to emergency department visits and hospital admissions for respiratory causes.

**BURNING COAL= BAD AIR DAYS**

According to the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, between 2008-2013, the Grand Rapids region (Allegan, Kent, Muskegon and Ottawa Counties) had 43 “Action Air” quality days, with 25 in 2012 alone. This means that the air is unhealthy for children and those with respiratory problems to breathe. Action air quality days are determined by the level of smog pollution, known as smog, and other dangerous pollutants in the air. Smog-causing pollution from coal-burning plants combines with warm weather to exacerbate respiratory problems for certain groups, making it harder to breathe. Pollution from Consumers Energy’s large coal-burning plants contributes to the problem, along with automobiles and pollution blown in from across Lake Michigan. During the summer months, warmer weather increases levels of dangerous smog pollution.

**SULFUR DIOXIDE= SUNBURN ON YOUR LUNGS**

Coal pollution contains sulfur dioxide, known to contribute to asthma, emphysema and bronchitis, and even premature death. It can also have chronic effects on the development of lungs in children. Exposure to sulfur dioxide in even very short time periods—such as five minutes—can have significant health impacts to human health, including causing aggravation of asthma, and other respiratory illnesses. Sulfur dioxide exposure can also aggravate existing heart disease, leading to increased hospitalizations and premature deaths. Asthmatics, children and the elderly are especially at risk from such pollution. Some doctors have likened exposure to sulfur dioxide to getting a sunburn on your lungs.

**ENDNOTES**

1 “State of the Air.” American Lung Association, 2014
2 Ottawa, Allegan, Muskegon and Kent county areas
4 http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/assets/oir_2050/2050_03162010-1.pdf
5 http://www.deqmiair.org/actionday.cfm

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