

Health Effects of Fossil Fuels Policy

See also the Safe Climate, Preparing for Peak Oil, and Nuclear Energy as a response to Global Warming Policies

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) notes:

1. Fossil fuels have been the essential energy source for enabling modern complex industrial society. As such their use is embedded in government energy policy and practice. Further, industry has invested heavily in extraction, distribution and use infrastructures. Both Government and industry see gas as an ongoing energy source for Australia and a source of export revenue for the future (GISERA 2012, Gas Industry Social & Environmental Research Alliance (GISERA) <http://www.gisera.org.au/>).
2. Fossil fuels use however has large scale detrimental effects by generating greenhouse gasses (GHG) which are enhancing the greenhouse effect on our planet and causing global warming. The effects of global warming are likely to be detrimental to human health (PHAA, 2011).
3. Fossil fuels', particularly coal's, life cycle impacts are also detrimental to human health, causing a range of problems from dust, particulates and volatile chemical exposures; pneumoconiosis; accidents in mining with heavy metal, such as mercury; and particulate exposures from pollution from electricity generation (Castleden et al 2011, Epstein et al 2011, McKenzie et al 2012).
4. The use of natural gas has been put forward as a temporary transition fuel with less GHG emissions than coal, but the expanding use of unconventional gas (coal seam, shale and tight gas) bring health and environmental impacts that offset its potential benefits. These effects include air, water and soil contamination from chemicals used in drilling and hydraulic fracturing, large quantities of salts from waste fluids left during water management, and volatile gasses released from coal seams. These potentially effect humans and livestock, and can compromise agriculture (Bamberger & Oswald 2012). Further, many of the chemicals used are known to have adverse health effects and most have not been assessed by the National Industrial Chemicals Notification and Assessment Scheme - NICNAS (Lloyd-Smith & Sendup 2011).
5. There is widespread concern among the general public and growing concern among health professionals about the serious and poorly assessed threats to health and the environment from fossil fuel mining, extraction and use (Lock the Gate Alliance, 2012).
6. There are concerns about the effects of hydraulic fracturing on aquifer integrity and use of scarce water for extraction operations with both loss and contamination of ground water. Relatively scarce water is also diverted away from agricultural and other uses to industry. Both compromise water quality for human and livestock consumption and agricultural use (Osborn et al 2011, Entekin 2011 et al).

7. That government and industry are actively engaged in developing standards for coal seam gas extraction but that this is limited in scope to extraction only, and will only be effective if monitoring and regulation are adequately resourced (Standing Council on Energy and Resources (SCER 2012)).
8. Environment and concerned citizens groups propose moratoriums on further development until reliable answers to these concerns are available.
9. The government is establishing an Independent Expert Scientific Committee on Coal Seam Gas and Large Coal Mining Developments (the IESC) to research and provide advice to the Federal and State/Territory Environment Ministers on these subjects.

PHAA believes that:

10. In relation to energy provision, a rapid transition to more efficient energy use and renewable energy sources needs to happen urgently (see *Safe Climate Policy*) and that expansion of unconventional gas and ongoing coal use are delaying that transition.
11. In regard to fossil fuel energy sources, where there is potential for detrimental ecosystem, environmental, food production and human health and societal effects, research to better understand these threats should be undertaken. The precautionary principle should apply and use of these sources should not be expanded and in fact be wound back.

PHAA recognises that:

Ongoing policy and planning that assumes the further expansion of the fossil fuel industry does not support sustainable development goals, and exacerbates climate change concerns. This is particularly so with exploitation of conventional sources in environmentally sensitive areas, and the development of unconventional gas sources.

PHAA resolves:

The Ecology and Environment Special Interest Group will work with National Office and State and Territory Branches to -

12. promote sustainable energy options and development goals.
13. research and raise concerns about the potentially serious and poorly assessed threats to human wellbeing and health and to the environment from fossil fuel extraction and use.
14. advocate that protection of human wellbeing, health and the environment should be put in place before further fossil fuel developments occur, which may include taking action on proposals to expand the fossil fuel industry.
15. work with government and other organisations in achieving these ends.

References

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