

# Firms 'abusing law' on air quality standards compliance

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SOME of SA's heavy industrial companies were "abusing the law" that allowed firms to defer compliance with air quality standards if they were purchasing equipment that would reduce air pollution, Department of Environmental Affairs air quality management chief director Thuli Mdluli said yesterday.

While SA has not suffered the hazardous smog blankets that have affected China's tourism industry and fomented public discontent in

the world's most populous nation, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research has shown that air quality across SA often did not meet the country's and the World Health Organisation's guidelines on limits for aerosols.

"People abuse the law. These standards were first promulgated in 2010. People have had five years to comply, and another five to comply with (standards that are to apply in 2020). There was a drawn-out negotiation process from 2008 that I was involved in before I joined the department," Ms Mdluli said.

Although she did not mention specific companies, power utility Eskom has indicated its intention to apply for "rolling" postponements, in effect asking for complete exemption from certain standards.

Ms Mdluli said the law did not allow exemption. Eskom said it was not immediately able to comment.

Eskom is not the only air polluter to have asked the department for a postponement by the March 31 deadline. Others are ArcelorMittal SA, Northam Platinum, Engen, Shell, PPC, Sasol, and Sasol and Total's Natref refinery in Sasolburg.

But Ms Mdluli said that more damaging to human health than industrial polluters was the domestic burning of coal and fuels such as paraffin, clay-brick manufacturing and motor vehicle emissions. This was because in all three cases emissions were in the "breathing zone" as opposed to hundreds of metres above it. This did not let industrial emitters off the hook because their emissions added to the "background pollution" in SA, she said.

Ms Mdluli said it would be more beneficial to human health to reduce SA's "breathing zone" emissions,

and some government departments were waiting for Cabinet approval of a document that set out how to coordinate programmes to reduce domestic emissions.

Business Day reported earlier this week that a R40bn programme to upgrade SA's oil refineries to produce cleaner fuel was likely to be delayed. The programme was set to be completed in 2017, and this is still the official date, but the Department of Energy is understood to have told oil company executives that the deadline will have to be extended.

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