

The dirty scoop on air in N.J.

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Sulfur dioxide soot emissions from PSEG's power plant on Duck Island in Hamilton jumped almost 50 percent from 1995 to 2003, a report released yesterday by an environmental group shows.

That was one of the findings of a study by the New Jersey Public Interest Research Group that found increased sulfur dioxide emissions at 75 percent of New Jersey's power generating plants.

"We had been under the impression that air quality in New Jersey was getting better, so we were surprised to see this," said Emily Rusch, an energy advocate for NJPIRG.

"When it comes to power plant pollution, many of New Jersey's dirtiest power plants just keep getting dirtier," she said.

The report, "Pollution on the Rise: Local Trends in Power Plant Pollution," examined data on power plant emissions compiled by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The report detailed emission levels of carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxide and sulfur dioxide, plant by plant in all 50 states from 1995 through 2003.

Carbon dioxide emissions lead to global warming, nitrogen oxide creates smog and sulfur dioxide creates soot. Smog and soot can lead to respiratory diseases such as asthma or bronchitis.

The group called on the Codey administration to adopt new rules requiring that 20 percent of energy produced in New Jersey come from clean sources, such as wind or solar power, by 2020.

The group also said the state should work to reduce global warming by forcing power plants to cut carbon dioxide emissions by at least 25 percent by 2020 and should set strict limits on soot and smog emissions from plants.

DEP officials did not immediately comment on the report.

In April, state officials said smog levels throughout New Jersey exceeded federal air quality standards. All of the state's 21 counties were deemed "moderately noncompliant" under the standards adopted in 1997 by the Clinton administration.

At the time, Bradley Campbell, commissioner of the Department of Environmental Protection, said the state would consider expensive pollution reductions by businesses, cars and trucks.

The NJPIRG report found that carbon dioxide emissions statewide rose from 10.3 million tons to 12.9 million tons from 1995 through 2003 and sulfur dioxide emissions rose from 40,937 tons to 50,690 tons in the same period.

Nitrogen oxide emissions in New Jersey decreased from 30,523 tons in 1995 to 23,462 tons in 2003.

At the PSEG plant in Hamilton, sulfur dioxide emissions rose 49 percent from 8,402 tons in 1995 to 12,487 tons in 2003, the report said.

Carbon dioxide emissions at the plant went up from 1.9 million tons in 1995 to 2.6 million tons in 2003 while nitrogen dioxide emissions dropped from 10,661 tons in 1995 to 9,742 tons in 2003.

Neil Brown, a spokesman for Newark-based PSEG Power, said the increase may be due to a shift from burning natural gas at the plant to produce energy to burning coal, which is cheaper to buy.

"We've worked very hard to reduce environmental impacts in New Jersey and continue to work hard to move the electric power nationally to cleaner energy," Brown said.

The utility giant installed nitrogen oxide controls at the Hamilton plant during the summer and plans call for PSEG to voluntarily reduce sulfur dioxide emissions at its plant in Hudson County by 2006 and in Hamilton by 2012.

"We need the state and the federal government to step in, but we really need power companies like PSEG to be actively seeking cleaner sources of energy," Rusch said. "They're based in New Jersey. Their employees live here. They breathe the air too."

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