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ALL CLEAR

Falling coal price means empty roads and cleaner air

Gugu Myeni

WHILE the big fall in coal prices may be bad for business, local residents are breathing a sigh of relief amid fewer trucks on the roads and reduced coal dust carried by the wind. The obvious reduction in the number of side-tipper trucks, which had become an almost permanent feature on the John Ross highway and along the N2 during the past year, is attributed to the sliding coal export price.

There have been no measured exceedances of the South African daily limits for particulates at any of the RBCAA online stations for the months of January and February thus far

- RBCAA

It is currently sitting at around 95 dollars per ton - down from \$99.65 in December and \$162 in 2022, after a peak of \$214 in October 2021. This comes on the back of a major decline in coal exports through Richards Bay, with only 47.21 million tonnes exported last year - levels last recorded in 1992. The export volumes are more than two million tonnes down from the 50.35 million tonnes achieved in 2022 - with expectations that it could take a few years to get volumes back up to around 60 or 70 million tonnes. The Richards Bay Coal Terminal, along with Transnet Freight Rail, cited various challenges on the north corridor impacting the critical coal export line that has affected throughput. These include security, locomotive availability and infrastructure related issues. While some have alluded to sabotage, the huge under-investment in rail is cited as a major contributor. And with fewer trucks driving through the



There has been a noticeable reduction in the number of trucks queuing on the city's major roads and less coal dust in homes city, and consequently less coal stockpiling and handling, particulate emissions to air are radically reduced, according to air quality monitoring watchdog, the Richards Bay Clean Air Association (RBCAA).

Healthier air
"The data recorded by the RBCAA shows a steady decrease in particulate (dust) levels, both at the online (real time) ambient monitoring stations and the RBCAA dust fallout monitoring sites," said RBCAA communications officer, Sandy Camminga. "This is believed to be directly associated with a decrease in truck volumes and therefore lower coal volumes through the port. "This is particularly evident at the RBCAA's Harbour West station located at the port's west entrance, which recorded significant monthly exceedances of the non-residential dust fallout limit for the period September 2023 to January 2024, with no exceedance recorded for February. "The residential dust fallout sites have also shown a steady decrease since December. "In addition, there have been no measured exceedances of the South African daily limits for particulates at any of the RBCAA online stations for the months of January and February thus far." Residents in Richards Bay suburbs, who at times last year had to wipe coal dust off surfaces a few times a day, validate the findings as homes are now virtually free of black dust fallout. However, Camminga did issue a word of warning: "The RBCAA also measures against World Health Organisation daily limits, which is a health-based guideline, for particulates. These limits are exceeded daily at almost all the RBCAA monitoring stations."

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