

As Italian civil society groups testify in court at a highly symbolic trial on coal's damage, Roberta Arbinolo asks EEB expert Riccardo Nigro what happened in Vado Ligure, and how it can set an historic precedent for Europe.

Organisations including EEB member Legambiente, WWF Italy, Greenpeace Italy, Medicina Democratica and the local citizens' committee Uniti per la Salute testified about the environmental and public health disaster provoked by Tirreno Power's Vado Ligure coal-fired power plant.

The company is accused of causing 427 premature deaths and the hospitalisation of over 2,000 people by illegally operating highly polluting units for 14 years, until a court ordered their seizure in 2014 because of the imminent threat to the health of people living in the area.

Coal plants contribute substantially to the emission of dangerous air pollutants into the atmosphere, provoking respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, including chronic bronchitis and asthma, and increasing the risk of premature death.

Before joining the EEB as campaign coordinator for coal combustion and mines, Riccardo Nigro followed the Tirreno Power case closely for WWF Italy. We asked him to tell us what happened on the ground, and what it means for people and communities across Europe.

How did Tirreno Power's Vado Ligure coal plant affect people's health?

Riccardo Nigro: The power plant is located very close to the village of Vado Ligure and had an immediate effect on people's health.

Already in 2013, citizens had been feeling the unsustainable toll the power plant was inflicting: pharmacists reported a higher consumption of drugs to treat respiratory diseases, whereas citizens held that cancer incidence in Vado Ligure was much higher than the average.

All these suspicions were confirmed when, on 19 February 2014, figures from the epidemiological study commissioned by Savona's attorney leaked out: between 2000 and 2007 the coal power plant directly caused almost 400 deaths, 1,700 to 2,000 hospitalisations for respiratory and cardiovascular diseases and 450 hospitalisations of children for respiratory problems (asthma).

Civil society groups have played a key role in shining a light on this scandal. How did they do it?

There was a wide group of local committees and national NGOs fighting to close the power

plant.

National NGOs WWF Italy, Greenpeace and Legambiente did an amazing job to support local organisations, including Medici per l'Ambiente, WWF Liguria, Rete Savonese contro il Carbone. They provided them with legal and technical assistance, analysed air and soil samples to support the campaign, involved national media, and filed complaints against the derogations that were guaranteed to the power plant, to let it continue operating despite breaching pollution laws.

What will now happen to the plant?

Eventually, in 2016, Tirreno Power closed the plant. The area is subject to a new industrialisation plan, but at the moment the plant lies in the middle of Vado Ligure's bay, along the motorway that every summer brings thousands of people living in Northern Italy to the beautiful seaside of Spotorno, Loano and Alassio.

Its silent stacks remain as a physical reminder that coal is no longer the way to produce energy, that coal kills people.

What does this case represent for law-makers and local communities tackling coal across Europe?

The fact that the management of the power plant is currently on trial represents an important precedent to hold coal polluters accountable. Coal facilities managers all around Europe should think and close them as soon as possible, and by 2030 at the latest. In Italy, the government has announced a coal phase out by 2025.

Also, the scientific evidence found during Vado Ligure's investigations over the last few years linking coal to diseases and death of actual people must reawaken their consciences and urge them to accelerate the move towards a coal-free future.

Local communities all around Europe must know that a just transition beyond coal is possible and that they have full rights to challenge every decision putting their health and future in serious danger.

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