

Volkswagen scandal: nearly 12,000 deaths could be avoided if industry met emissions targets

Health experts levels of nitrogen oxides should have fallen by half if car manufacturers were meeting agreed emissions levels



If car companies met emissions targets, levels of nitrogen oxides could be halved, say health experts

By Sarah Knapton, Science Editor

10:00PM BST 22 Sep 2015

Nearly 12,000 people a year may be dying because the car industry has not met emissions promises, health experts have claimed.

For years health experts have warned that levels of nitrogen oxides in the air are far too high for claims by motor manufacturers to be true.

Around 30,000 people die each year because of pollution, usually of heart attacks, strokes or asthma, and around 23,500 of these are directly attributable to diesel cars.

"If it is shown that this has also been occurring in Europe, I would have thought there would be a strong case for governments to seek compensation"

Alastair Lewis, Professor of Atmospheric Chemistry at the University of York said that levels of nitrogen oxides had plateaued when they should have halved, which would have saved thousands of lives.

Dr Jo Barnes, Air Quality
Management Resource Centre,
UWE Bristol

“What is established is that virtually all new vehicles in recent years appear to emit substantially more NO_x in the real-world than they do when tested in labs, irrespective of manufacturer.

“VW appear to have been caught red-handed, but it would seem highly likely that others have also played dubious games to pass emissions tests.

“The reality is that NO_x has effectively plateaued in most cities, and in many places above the European air quality standards

“If NO_x had followed the predicted trends that were based on vehicle manufacturers data, European cities would be around half of what is currently observed.”



Martin Winterkorn, former chairman of the board of directors of Volkswagen AG

In Europe, the WHO estimates about 500,000 people die prematurely as a result of air pollution every year.

In April the supreme court today ordered the UK government to set out new plans to clean up Britain's toxic air after ministers admitted they did not plan to meet legal limits on nitrogen oxides until 2030 – 20 years later than originally planned.

Prof Ian Colbeck, Professor of Aerosol Science, University of Essex, said: “It has been observed for some time that real world driving conditions do not deliver the emission reductions shown in the laboratory. The European Commission will require real world tests in 2017. It has recently been

estimated that the impact of NO₂, the pollutant in question, on mortality is equivalent to 23,500 deaths every year in the UK.”

The Clean Air in London campaign described the effects of diesel vehicle emissions as the "biggest public health catastrophe".



Nearly 12,000 lives a year could be saved by cutting fumes to levels that the car industry promised Photo: ALAMY

Founder Simon Birkett called for a royal commission to investigate "if manufacturers have deliberately contributed to that problem in some way".

Dr Jo Barnes, Air Quality Management Resource Centre, UWE Bristol, added: “If it is shown that this has also been occurring in Europe, I would have thought there would be a strong case for governments to seek compensation from culpable vehicle manufacturers against the millions of pounds/euros of public funding that has been spent trying to address local air pollution.

"We are aware that a large proportion of new vehicles were failing to achieve the latest Euro emission standards in real-world driving conditions and that the purely test-bed cycle emissions testing was flawed, but that tests were actively and knowingly manipulated in this way is criminal.

"Perhaps it is not surprising that profit margins take precedence over public health, but with transport emissions the main contributor to urban air pollution, resulting in nearly 10,000 early deaths a year in London alone and hugely decreasing quality of life for children, the elderly and those with pre-existing health complaints, the public should be utterly outraged by this news.”

