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Report: Pollution from coal costs billions

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BY RENEE SCHOOF - MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS

WASHINGTON -- Generating electricity by burning coal is responsible for about half of an estimated \$120 billion in yearly costs from early deaths and health damages to thousands of Americans from the use of fossil fuels, a federal advisory group said Monday.

A one-year study by the National Research Council looked at many costs of energy production and the use of fossil fuels that aren't reflected in the price of energy. The \$120 billion sum was the cost to human health from U.S. electricity production, transportation and heating in 2005, the latest year with full data.

The report also looks at other hidden costs from climate change, hazardous air pollutants such as mercury, harm to ecosystems and risks to national security, but it doesn't put a dollar value on them.

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"We would characterize our estimate as an underestimate," because it didn't include those other costs, said Jared Cohon, the president of Carnegie Mellon University and the chairman of the committee that produced the report.

The report says it's impossible to put an amount on all the hidden costs of energy, in some cases because of a lack of information but also because the study had limited time and resources. It focused on the costs of air pollution on health.

BY THE NUMBERS

The National Research Council concluded that pollution from burning fossil fuel causes:

\$120 billion in health-related costs each year

18,000-19,000 early deaths each year



Coal-fired power and motor-vehicle transportation accounted for roughly 99 percent of those costs.

Electricity production accounted for \$63 billion of the damages that weren't related to climate change. Coal-fired plants, which produce about half of the nation's electricity, accounted for \$62 billion and natural gas, which produces 20 percent, produced less than \$1 billion of the damages.

The report looks at the sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and particulate emissions from 406 coal-fired plants in the lower 48 states, which produce 95 percent of the nation's coal-generated electricity.

There were wide differences among plants in the amount of pollution produced. The estimated health damages ranged from less than half a cent per kilowatt hour to more than 12 cents. The average was 3.2 cents.

The best use of the information is to compare it on a plant-by-plant basis with the cost of installing and running scrubbers to reduce the pollution, said Maureen Cropper, a professor of economics at the University of Maryland and the vice chairman of the 19-member report committee.

"There are plants that are very clean out there, and the cost of further controls would not be worth the

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