

## Air pollution

### Information sheet

### Air pollution – where does it come from?

We hear a lot in the media about air pollution. It is easy to think that all the pollution in the air comes from human activities in our homes, in industry, in agriculture and from transport. However, pollutants like dust, smoke and pollen are produced from natural sources like forest fires, volcanoes and plants.

The gases from natural sources have stayed at a fairly steady level in the atmosphere for thousands of years. This is because there are natural ways that pollutants are removed from the air. For example, sulfur dioxide and oxides of nitrogen are removed from the air by dissolving in rain.

**Table 1** Gases from natural sources that cause air pollution

Gas	Source	Amount per year throughout the world / millions of tonnes
carbon monoxide, CO	forest fires, biological processes	2000
sulfur dioxide, SO <sub>2</sub>	volcanoes, biological processes in sea and soil	150
methane, CH <sub>4</sub>	wetlands, termites, oceans	200
nitrogen oxides, NO <sub>x</sub>	bacteria in oceans and soils, lightning flashes	75

**Table 2** Some of the gases that cause air pollution as a result of human activities

Gas	Source	Amount per year throughout the world / millions of tonnes
carbon monoxide, CO	burning fossil fuels and biomass	800
sulfur dioxide, SO <sub>2</sub>	burning coal and oil, smelting sulfide ores	150
methane, CH <sub>4</sub>	rice fields, cattle, landfill sites, producing fossil fuels	450
nitrogen oxides, NO <sub>x</sub>	burning fossil fuels and biomass, use of nitrogen fertilisers, manufacture of nylon and nitric acid	100