

Lawsuit against U.S. Steel claims pollution from Clairton Coke Works harming residents

AARON AUPPERLEE | Friday, May 26, 2017, 4:39 p.m.

Cheryl Hurt can see the stacks of U.S. Steel's Clairton Coke Works from the window of the day care she runs out of her home.

And she checks them everyday before she lets the children outside to play.

"I look at the sky to see how bad the smoke is coming out of the stacks," Hurt, a lifelong Clairton resident, said.

Hurt and John Marcus, of neighboring Jefferson Hills, have sued U.S. Steel over emissions from its Clairton Coke Works. The lawsuit, filed Thursday in the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, alleges that U.S. Steel failed to contain toxic and hazardous substances and that the pollution has harmed people living near the coke works and hurt property values.

Meghan Cox, a spokeswoman for U.S. Steel, said the company does not comment on pending litigation.

The lawsuit claims that pollution from the coke works exposes people to sulfur dioxide, particulate matter, ammonia, benzene, carbon disulfide, lead, naphthalene, toluene, a mix of methane, carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide and other toxic and hazardous chemicals. The pollution has been linked to heart and respiratory diseases, cancer and asthma. Hurt said many children need to use inhalers while playing sports because of asthma and it seems like everyone in town has a relative or knows someone with cancer.

"We want to breathe," Hurt said. "Bottom line, we want to breathe."

Downtown attorney Rob Peirce said several Clairton residents contacted his law firm with concerns about the coke works. Hurt and Marcus have requested that the lawsuit be a class-action suit. As a class-action suit, people living within about three-mile radius of the coke works could join. About 7,000 people are possibly affected by the coke works, Peirce said.

U.S. Steel agreed to make improvements at the coke works last year in a settlement with the Allegheny County Health Department. The agreement required U.S. Steel to inspect the walls of the coke ovens and come up with a plan to fix them, meet standards to limit pollution within three years, keep coal inside ovens for less time to reduce emissions and make observations of smoke plumes from equipment several times a day.

U.S. Steel paid nearly \$4 million in fines to the county since 2009 because of emissions violations.

Hurt said she feels the county as well as state, federal and local governments, haven't done enough to fix the problem.

"It's time that we try to correct some of the things that are wrong," Hurt said. "Something has to happen in terms of correcting the pollution that we're exposed to."

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