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Years of Neglect and Corroded Equipment Led to the Catastrophic Fire at the U.S. Steel Plant – Breathe Project Response

Pittsburgh, Pa. – The Breathe Project has issued the following in response to the media reports published today that reveal court documents showing that U.S. Steel allowed its Mon Valley operations to collapse completely at the expense of the health of local residents while also reducing a large proportion of its plant maintenance workforce.

This news comes at a time when the month of November 2021 has been filled with still more news about bad air quality in our region.

Out of the first 19 days of this month, our region's air, mostly in the Mon Valley, ranked among the top 10 worst places in the country for at least a portion of the day on 9 of these 19 days, especially in the morning hours. On at least 4 of these occasions the air ranked as the #1 worst air in the country for at least part of the day.

A recent posting by [Group Against Smog and Pollution](#) showed that our region's air has violated the state's Hydrogen Sulfide (H₂S) standard over 45 times this year.

In contrast with the severe neglect documented at the Clairton plant leading to the explosion and fire, U.S. Steel was making large profits during 2018 and used the money to buy back shares instead of investing in the plant to fix problems. U.S. Steel posted full-year 2018 net earnings of \$1.115 billion and spent \$75 million in repurchasing shares.

Despite what occurred at Clairton since 2018, the company has continued this pattern of prioritizing shareholder earnings over fixing neglected facilities, including offloading its [pension obligations as well as \\$300 million in shareholder buybacks while achieving \\$2 billion in earnings](#) while investing less than \$18 million in facility repairs.

The U.S. Steel Clairton plant is the largest coke-making facility in the U.S. and the region's largest single source of several major air pollutants. As media reports document, the Clairton fire left it without key pollution controls that would remain so for three months.

The event caused asthma cases to spike, and upticks in hospitalization, emergency visits and medicine use among asthma cases.

The company's investigators concluded that these cumulative failures, all caused by long-term corrosion at the plant, made the fire worse than it otherwise would have been.

Breathe Project partners offered the following comments reflecting on the years of U.S. Steel's neglect in the Mon Valley:

Melanie Meade, Clairton Resident

"At some point those with authority and power to change U.S. Steel's decades of neglect will have to confess that they chose to avoid greener industry because they care more about profit over people," said Melanie Meade, Clairton resident. "The fact that harm to health is overshadowed by the industry's gains is repulsive. Children with poor education, poor food and environmental pollution are suffering when the industry can change its operations and infrastructure to create a better environment. There has never been continuous improvement in Clairton and the lives lost proves it."

Edith Abeyta, Braddock resident

"U.S. Steel's neglect and its preference for profits over people has come to light," said Braddock resident Edith Abeyta. "It's time they take care of the damage they have done to the community and their workers."

Jacquelyn Bonomo, Penn Future

"U.S. Steel says it doesn't 'litigate in the court of public opinion,' but facts speak for themselves," said PennFuture President and CEO Jacquelyn Bonomo. "And the facts are summed up by one official who toured the Clairton Coke Works in 2017 and called it 'one of the most decrepit facilities I've ever seen in my nearly 30 years of work.' The Christmas Eve fire that knocked out pollution controls was entirely preventable and was the result of years of repeated failures to upgrade old and antiquated infrastructure at the plant. The result was three months of pollution exceedances that had very real health impacts for those in closest proximity to the plant, including spikes in asthma events and hospitalizations.

"This news report is further proof that U.S. Steel remains a toxic neighbor to Clairton and the region, and that even when faced with horrible conditions at the plant, the company refuses to undertake serious and meaningful upgrades and repairs to the Clairton Coke Works to protect the health of workers, communities and our air. Instead it continues to invest in other properties outside of Pennsylvania."

Patrick Campbell, GASP

"These findings, unfortunately, confirm what GASP and others have long suspected. Back in 2019, we examined a federal class-action lawsuit filed against U.S. Steel on behalf of its investors. That lawsuit included testimony from current and former U.S. Steel employees who described systemic maintenance and operational failures," GASP Executive Director Patrick

Campbell said. "GASP's analysis showed the company was struggling to comply with air emissions standards during the same time the plaintiffs alleged U.S. Steel asked employees to 'jury rig' machines and generally operated with a 'don't buy, get by' mentality. These findings make it clear where U.S. Steel's priorities lie, and it's not with the residents who live nearby or their employees. U.S. Steel is and has always been a company that puts profits above people. And that's had a human toll - something made clear by recent health studies."

Myron Arnowitt, Clean Water Action

"As usual the community is the last to know about health threatening problems at U.S. Steel's Clairton Coke Work," said Myron Arnowitt, Pa. director for Clean Water Action. "This is a company that has a net income of \$3 billion just in this year alone. If they made a priority of protecting the community or their own workers, events like the 2018 fire would not have happened. But the fire is just one example of what happens every year for Clairton and Mon Valley residents. Days of dangerous air pollution levels such as just happened earlier this month, are a regular event. The result is more asthma, heart attacks, strokes and cancer."

Dr. Edward Ketyer, PSR

"Denying objective evidence that the fire at Clairton Coke Works did indeed cause 'adverse health responses or symptoms in even the most sensitive populations' further demonstrates that U.S. Steel is out of touch with reality and can't be trusted to protect the health and safety of its own workers and neighbors in the Mon Valley," said Edward Ketyer, M.D., president of Physicians for Social Responsibility Pennsylvania."

Patricia M. DeMarco, Forest Hills Borough Council

"Thousands of people living under the plume of the U.S. Clairton Coke Works have suffered chronic exposure to sulfurous pollution for years, spiked with periodic explosions.," said Patricia M. DeMarco, vice president, Forest Hills Borough Council.
"We need to see USS held responsible for criminal negligence. No company has the right to pay to pollute: they have to clean up their operations."

Matthew Mehalik, Executive Director, Breathe Project

"Why did our region's leaders hide from what happened in Clairton in 2018/2019 or actively act as cheerleaders for a company that continued to profit while harming the community and putting its workforce at risk? Why does this posturing continue today? We need to put the health and well-being of residents first in any decisions about the future of what happens in the Mon Valley, including stopping ongoing bad air episodes that affect everyone in Allegheny County."

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