

BREATHE PROJECT

The Air We Share

U.S. Steel's Clairton Coke Works Has a Legacy of Unlawful Pollution

Updated Feb. 22, 2022

- Air quality in Allegheny County has improved since the industrial days of the past, but there is still a long way to go before it is truly clean and safe for everyone to breathe. The Allegheny County Health Dept. should act to reduce air pollution rapidly and significantly.
- Allegheny County is in the top 1% of all counties among all counties in the US, urban and non-urban, from point source air toxics emissions. (Allegheny County ranks 27th out of more than 3000 counties). ([Cancer Risk in Allegheny County, Pa., May 2021](#))
- The Clairton Coke Works is the largest coke plant in the U.S. and has been major source of air pollution in our region for decades.
- Nearly 90% of the point source cancer risk estimated in Allegheny County is attributable to coke oven emissions, with 90% of those emissions coming from the Clairton facility. ([Cancer Risk in Allegheny County, Pa., May 2021](#))
- According to the PA State Implementation Plan's emissions inventory, the Clairton Coke Works emits over 554 tons of PM 2.5 per year (not including unplanned leaks and breakdowns), which is around 25 percent of all particle emissions from point sources in the county. ([ACHD PM2.5 SIP, Appendix D, Emissions Inventories, pp.14-15](#))
- The Allegheny County Health Department has issued at least 13 enforcement orders and notices of violation to the U.S. Steel Clairton Coke Works since April 2019, the time that the Coke Works fire episode was "fixed." ([ACHD Enforcement Orders for USS Clairton Coke Works](#))
- The Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) has fined U.S. Steel over \$1.73 million for penalties associated with emissions violations since April 2019, the time that the Coke Works fire episode was "fixed." ([ACHD Enforcement Orders for USS Clairton Coke Works](#))
- U.S. Steel is paying approximately \$217,000 per quarter in fines because of ongoing emissions violations at the USS Clairton Coke Works since April 2019, the time that the Coke Works fire episode was "fixed," with additional penalties for Q 2-4 for 2021 pending. ([ACHD Enforcement Orders for USS Clairton Coke Works](#))
- The history of paying quarterly fines instead of reducing emission violations indicates a willingness of U.S. Steel to operate the Clairton Coke Works in a "pay to pollute" relationship with ACHD.
- The Clairton Coke Work's Title 5 permit under review at the February 22, 2022 public hearing has been out-of-date for over 5 years when it expired in 2017. ACHD has been slow in updating this permit despite being singled out by the USEPA for Title 5 permit backlogs in 2018 and subjected to a USEPA remediation plan. ([ACHD EPA Remediation Plan](#))
- Pittsburgh ranks as one of the top 10 most polluted cities in the nation from year-round particle pollution. ([American Lung Association, 2021](#))
- [Medical professionals in Clairton](#) report evidence of children with higher rates of respiratory distress and asthma because of this pollution, nearly three-times the national average.
- During the first 51 days of 2022, 23 days (45%) had air rated as "not-good" in Allegheny County. ([EPA Airnow Data for 2022](#))
- In 2021 there were 189 days (52%) with air rated as "not good" in Allegheny County. ([EPA Airnow Data for 2021](#))

- [Group Against Smog and Pollution](#) reported that our region's air has violated the state's Hydrogen Sulfide (H₂S) standard more than 54 times in 2021, giving the air a rotten egg-like stench.
- Based on EPA's Highest-10 NowCast AQI Locations data, which tracks which regions of the country rank in the top-10 worst airsheds, based on Air Quality Index information on an hourly basis, our county has appeared on this top-10 worst list over 95 times in 2021 (26% of all days). ([EPA Highest NowCast AQI Locations](#))
- Out of the first 53 days of 2022 (including today), our region's air ranked among the top 10 worst places in the country for at least a portion of the day on 19 days (36% of all days) and was ranked as #1 worst air 7 of these times (13% of all days), especially in the morning hours. ([EPA Highest NowCast AQI Locations](#))
- One the eight county PM_{2.5} monitors (Liberty), is ranked in the worst 10 percent nationally of all monitored locations. Three additional monitors (North Braddock, Parkway, Lawrenceville) are in the worst 20 percent, based on 2020 data.
- The draft Title V permit does not include monitoring requirements that are sufficient to ensure compliance with applicable permit requirements.
- People in our region speak out about these frequent bad air episodes regularly and frequently. ([SWPA Town Halls Videos](#)).
- On Dec. 24, 2018, an explosion and fire destroyed the plant's 100-yard-long building that contained its pollution control equipment that removes oils and sulfur compounds from raw coking gas. [See Breathe Cam video of the fire.](#)
- The plant operated without pollution controls between Dec. 24, 2018, and April 3, 2019.
- During this period U.S. Steel diverted and flared raw, untreated coking gas by burning it at the massive, 3-port Peachtree flare above the valley near the connected U.S Steel Irvin Works in the Mon Valley.
- According to a Feb. 27, 2019, Allegheny County Health Dept. enforcement order, U.S. Steel vented nearly 75,000 pounds of sulfur dioxide in a single day—this is the equivalent to the weight of three school buses per day. This is also equivalent to emitting as much sulfur dioxide into the air every 11 days as it was emitting in a year prior to the explosion.
- [Penn Environment and Clean Air Council](#) – joined by the Allegheny County Health Dept. – have sued U.S. Steel alleging that several of the company's Mon Valley facilities are operating in violation of their Clean Air Act Permits.
- Pollution from the Clairton Coke Works affects many people, particularly many low income, elderly, and African American people. According to environmental justice statistics from the [U.S. EPA's EJ Screen tool](#).
 - Approximately 130,000 people live within a 5-mile radius of the Clairton Coke Works property (5-mile ring centered at 40.318643-79.897805) 1/3 of the people have low income
 - People in this area have air that is worse than 91 percent of the entire country for particulate matter
 - 36 percent are minority population, primarily African American, and 1/5 are older than 64
- [U.S. Steel](#) reported net earnings of \$4.174 billion in January 2022. The company withdrew a promise of \$1 billion for upgrades to the two Mon Valley facilities in our region. Instead, the company is investing \$3 billion in a mini mill in Osceola, Arkansas, where it will employ non-union workers.

*The **Breathe Project** is a coalition of more than 55 environmental organizations including citizens, advocates, public health professionals and academics working to improve air quality, eliminate climate pollution and make our region a healthy, prosperous place to live. The collaborative powers the Breathe Project, its community outreach platform.*