

Remarks for Clean Steel Press Conference  
June 22, 2026  
7:00 pm EDT

Thank you all for joining the press conference today. I and my colleagues appreciate the opportunity to weigh in on the need for clean steel investments in Indiana and Pennsylvania, one year after Nippon purchased U.S. Steel and raised expectations that needed capital investments were coming to neglected, legacy steel facilities and communities.

I also want to express my support and appreciation for my colleague, Qiyam Ansari, who could not participate this evening. I hope you all will follow up with Qiyam later on.

We believe communities and workers in legacy steel have more than earned, and deserve to be supported by, investments that build upon and strengthen them, now and into the future.

I am, Matthew Mehalik, Executive Director of the [Breathe Project](http://breatheproject.org). We are a collaboration of [over 50 organizations](#) working to improve air quality, eliminate climate pollution and make Southwestern Pennsylvania a healthy and prosperous place to live.

We focus on the Monongahela Valley, the site of Andrew Carnegie's very first blast furnace at the Edgar Thomson Works, which began production over 150 years ago in 1875. This site is where my great grandparents, grandparents, and parents worked and lived.

When the deal was announced and approved one year ago, The [Breathe Project emphasized](#) that,

"Real progress will only come when public health and community revitalization are treated as non-negotiable priorities. There have been too many years of promise-breaking and too much emphasis on short-term investments that continue to perpetuate community health harms and workforce anxiety. There needs to be a focus on fundamental strategic priorities that would shift from fossil-fuel based steelmaking in the Mon Valley to cutting edge fossil-fuel free technology suitable for the future."

This is a hero opportunity that could transform otherwise neglected facilities and communities.

Unfortunately, one year later, we have not seen this perspective taken to heart. What we have seen is a move to fast-track the construction of hot strip mills, which provide zero effort towards upgrading the entire upstream steelmaking process, which includes coking, blast furnaces, and basic oxygen furnaces, that will continue dependence on coal, the dirtiest and least innovative steelmaking techniques, that will perpetuate harm on workers and communities, and that will do nothing to remove the anxiety about the eventual closure of the legacy steel industry. It is more of the same: short-term investments without serious consideration of public health and community revitalization.

The plants in the Mon Valley are based on an old business model because of heavy fossil fuel use, mostly coal, and high carbon emissions. This needs to change for the long-term viability given steel market demand trends.

This situation of neglect produces social harms experienced by residents and workers who are manipulated without regard for their well-being. It is time to stop the 150-year trend of ignoring people impacted by harmful investment decisions.

The steel industry is responsible for severe health impacts on residents.

The [Clairton Coke Works](#) dates to 1901 and is the largest coke plant in the United States and the largest by-products coke plant in North America. The Clairton Plant is a major source of CO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>x</sub>, PM<sub>2.5</sub>, PM<sub>10</sub>, SO<sub>2</sub>, VOCs, and Hazardous Air Pollutants (HAPs). The Clairton Coke Works is located in an environmental justice community. Approximately 130,000 people live within a 5-mile radius of the Clairton Coke Works property. 1/3 of the people have low income. 36 percent are people of color, and 1/5 of all residents are older than 64 ([EPA EJ Mapper Tool](#)).

People in proximity to the Clairton Works have air quality that is worse than 96 percent of all monitored regions in the U.S. for fine particles based on the latest 3-year average from U.S. EPA monitored data.

The [Edgar Thomson Works](#) dates to 1875 and emits severe levels of hazardous air pollutants, metals, benzene, and lead in addition to SO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>x</sub>, PM<sub>2.5</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>S pollution that harm health. Approximately 21,000 people live in Braddock, North Braddock and other communities within a 2-mile radius of Edgar Thomson. ([EPA EJ Mapper Tool](#)).

People in proximity to Edgar Thomson have air quality that is worse than 90 percent of all monitored regions in the U.S. for fine particles based on the latest 3-year average from U.S. EPA monitored data.

It is well known that particles are carriers for hazardous air pollutants that are delivered directly into the bloodstream of residents. As a result, Allegheny County's 1.2 million people are in the top 1% of all counties for cancer risk from point source air toxics emissions. Nearly 90% of the point source cancer risk in Allegheny County is attributable to coke oven emissions coming from the Clairton facility. ([Cancer Risk in Allegheny County, Pa., May 2021](#)).

The results of this pollution mean there are extra deaths occurring in our county from industrial air pollution. In 2024 a [scientific study of air pollution in Allegheny County](#) revealed that there are an estimated 640 -1,373 people per year dying from PM<sub>2.5</sub> pollution, based on 2020 – 2022 data. Mortality rates from PM<sub>2.5</sub> pollution were 33% higher in Allegheny County's low-income communities, and mortality rates were 18% higher in Allegheny County's communities of color. On average, somewhere between 2 – 4 people die each day in Allegheny County from industrial air pollution.

A 2017 [study of asthma in Mon Valley regional schools](#) found children exposed to Mon Valley air pollution had nearly a two-fold risk of having a diagnosis of asthma. In Clairton, 34% of the children were at risk for asthma compared to the national rate of 8% and the state and county rates of 10-13%.

Because of advocacy pressure, our air regulator has issued at least 22 [enforcement orders, stipulated penalties and notices of violation](#) and entered into several consent orders with US Steel since January of 2020. As a result, US Steel has paid over \$62 million as a result of these emissions violations. They have been forced to shutter the oldest coking batteries in Clairton, about ¼ of the plant's 2020 capacity. Progress is slow because of how deeply entrenched the industry has been in our region's governance and social institutions. But progress is happening, despite a [long history of documented broken promises](#) from this firm.

The harms also impact workers at these facilities. The coke works killed two workers and injured ten others on August 11, 2026. The company is suing the government to challenge the findings that OSHA reported about that incident.

The company has only met with a few cherry-picked community members to provide a fig leaf of cover, giving the impression that they have met with the community without actually doing so in a significant way. These

actions reflect the US Steel culture of old, not the hoped for more responsible culture of Nippon. This is likely because they have essentially retained the previous US Steel management team to continue to run these plants.

Their plans are to lead with building strip mill proposals that would lock blast furnaces into place for the near term and add pollution to residents that already host these older technologies. These proposals do not address the long-term strategic need to decarbonize and upgrade primary steelmaking processes, unlike what they have done for their Arkansas facilities.

Nippon's decarbonization strategy for the region is fuzzy at best, pushing any meaningful regional emission reductions to 2035, 2040, or later. Their strategy lacks any meaningful commitment on this topic, reflecting a lack of strategic positioning for the steel industry in legacy communities.

What were once grand hopes a year ago are fading into the grim reality that legacy steel industry communities are not getting the upgrades they need. Instead, they are receiving investments that best suit Nippon's short-term business goals. Where there was spectacle a year ago, there is now a diminished reality. The Mon Valley and Gary deserve better.

That is why we are asking Nippon:

- To commit investments that would upgrade primary steel making in Pennsylvania and Indiana.
- To replace old, outdated, facilities with new facilities that do not depend upon blast furnaces and coking.
- To honor communities that have born the burden from the past and deserve better treatment in the future.
- To help community members and workers who want a better way of life.

The people of the Mon Valley and Gary have given steel their labor, their loyalty, and too often their health. They deserve more than nostalgia and spectacle. They deserve a fair shot at the future. And if this industry has the courage to invest in that future, these communities can help lead the next era of steel.

Sincerely,

Matthew M. Mehalik, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
Breathe Project