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Erin Brockovich lands new role as the ... Toxic avenger

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and John Flint**

US environmental crusader Erin Brockovich is heading a campaign by a small bush community to sue aluminium giant Alcoa over poisoning claims.

Ms Brockovich has teamed with lawyers to review claims by residents of the town of Yarloop, 100km south of Perth, that the Wagerup refinery is making them sick.

She described the case as similar to the campaign made famous by the movie *Erin Brockovich*, starring Julia Roberts.

Ms Brockovich led the res-

idents of Hinkley, California, in a lawsuit against Pacific Gas and Electric that resulted in a record-breaking \$390 million settlement.

She was alerted to the plight of the Yarloop community by an email from a sick resident.

"I was intrigued with her illnesses and concerned at what she was suffering through, and recommended one of our toxicologists see her and he did," Ms Brockovich said in Perth yesterday.

"After he did some testing and researching, he said 'This is something you should look into'."

Wagerup will be the world's largest alumina refinery if Alcoa proceeds with a plan to double capacity at the plant

in a \$1.5 billion project.

Residents of Yarloop have complained of respiratory problems, skin irritations, fatigue, stomach upset, blood noses and even cancers and organ failure.

They believe their health problems are linked to emissions from the Wagerup alumina refinery, and are seeking compensation.

They also want to be compensated for declining property values.

About 170 people from the area have joined the Community Alliance for Positive Solutions action group, which has led discussions with Ms Brockovich and Shine Lawyers.

Simon Morrison, a partner with Shine Lawyers, said it

was too early to start talking about dollars but he was confident the residents had a good case.

He said hundreds of people had fallen ill or suffered a loss in property value.

Alcoa has consistently denied that Wagerup is unsafe.

In a statement yesterday, Alcoa of Australia chief medical officer Dr Michael Donoghue said many studies had shown that emissions from the Wagerup refinery were well within internationally accepted environmental and health guidelines.

The company said it had nothing to hide and would be happy to brief Ms Brockovich.

- with AAP



Campaign role: Julia Roberts as Brockovich.



Here comes the cavalry: environmental crusader Erin Brockovich and Yarloop resident Vince Puccio. Picture: COLIN MURTY