



# Toxic ties to Alcoa Report backs locals

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SICK residents near Alcoa's Wagerup refinery are a step closer in their bid to sue the mining giant accused of poisoning the local air.

For the first time, a government report has linked the smell of chemicals in Yarloop with emissions from Alcoa's nearby alumina plant, 125km south of Perth.

Lawyer Simon Morrison, who is working with US health campaigner Erin Brockovich on a class action involving 300 aggrieved locals, said the latest air-quality report by the Department of Environment and Conservation bolstered their case.

"This confirms what the residents have been saying and that is, the plume is hitting the people, because that had been in dispute," Mr Morrison said.

Air-emission experts, a Murdoch University toxicologist and frustrated locals have criticised the DEC for conducting air testing from August 10, 2006, to October 7, 2007, when the most controversial part of the refinery, the liquor burner, was switched off for maintenance.

Health complaints skyrocketed from just 40 to 1000 a year when the liquor burner, used to lower costs and



**SMOKER: Alcoa in Wagerup**

increase production, was installed in 1988.

"If the liquor burner is not on it's a bit of a wasted effort really," a chemical engineer for consultancy firm Airlabs Environmental, Chris Clunies-Ross, said.

Alcoa is the world's largest producer of alumina and the extraction process is a dirty business.

Thousands of hectares of jarrah forest are cut down to access soil, which is blasted at extreme temperatures with a caustic solution to extract alumina-producing bauxite.

Soil impurities, a cocktail of 260 chemicals, are emitted into the air or stockpiled as red dust beside the plant.

For more than a decade locals have complained of noxious smells and chronic health problems including pain, lethargy, bloody noses, sore eyes and throat.

Alcoa has consistently argued that the refinery does not make people sick, though in the past it has acknowledged irritations.

Alcoa said in a media statement this week: "Much of the report confirms what we already know about the way air transports emissions around our site, and it helps us further understand why people smell the refinery at certain times."

The statement flies in the face of a three-year parliamentary inquiry that said use of the word "odours" by Alcoa and regulatory authorities trivialised the importance of controlling emissions and was inappropriate when applied generically to toxic emissions.

Murdoch University toxicologist Peter Dingle said chemicals in the air caused odours.

"Those bad smells are made up of volatile organic compounds and odours can be toxic in their own right," Prof Dingle said.

Greens MP for the South-West Paul Llewellyn said the report called into question the expansion of the refinery from 4.7 to 6 million tonnes a year.