



Backed by Brockovich, refinery crusaders seek day in court

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AFTER two years of chronic earaches and nose bleeds, Cameron Auxer has had enough of living near Alcoa's Wagerup refinery, south of Perth.

But she can't leave because she and partner Vince Puccio are committed to fighting for compensation, along with other locals who believe the alumina refinery — soon to be the world's largest — has been damaging the health of residents for more than a decade.

Residents of the three hamlets surrounding the refinery — Yarloop, Hamel and Cookernup — this week won the support of US environmental crusader Erin Brockovich, but they have a long way to go in their battle to get what they believe is a fair deal from Alcoa.

Up to 160 residents are expected to join a class action against Alcoa, claiming health problems caused by refinery emissions, including nose bleeds, skin rashes and respiratory problems. "We're not about shutting Alcoa down, we just believe people

should be able to leave if they want or need to without being out of pocket," Ms Auxer said.

Last September, the West

Australian Government gave Alcoa the go-ahead for a \$1.5 billion expansion of the refinery. The approval stipulated 42 environmental conditions, including a housing and land buyback scheme, independent health studies and independent emission monitoring.

Alcoa will buy back houses in three areas: two around the refinery and a third south of the site.

The company denies emissions have caused any health problems to local residents. But tests conducted by the state Department of Environment and Conservation this year showed emissions from the refinery were reaching homes up to 5km away.

Within that area, fumes containing a mix of 260 chemicals had been found close to the ground for up to 18 hours, the department said.

Ms Brockovich has been flown to Western Australia at the expense of plaintiff lawyers representing the residents. A former beauty pageant contestant with no formal legal training, she started work as a file clerk in

the law firm that was handling her traffic-injury medical litigation.

She came across a medical file in 1993 and asked law firm principal Ed Masry if she could investigate claims hundreds of people were falling ill in the Californian town of Hinkley. Her investigations resulted in a \$333 million lawsuit against California's Pacific Gas and Electric Company. It was the largest sum ever paid in a direct-action lawsuit in US history.

In partnership with Mr Masry, Ms Brockovich went on to spearhead other lawsuits alleging toxic exposure and water pollution.

The original case, featured in the Hollywood film *Erin Brockovich*, launched its namesake into international stardom as a motivational speaker, activist and media celebrity.

After a decade as a principal in the law firm, she launched her own business, Brockovich Research & Consulting, which runs major environmental cases.

"My work is about helping people get the answers they need," she said, "and helping them find the deceit that ends up jeopardising them."



Campaign: Cameron Auxer at Alcoa's Wagerup refinery