



Alcoa deceived locals, writ says

By NARELLE TOWI
E Environment Reporter

THE WA public was deceived by mining giant Alcoa before the first brick was even laid at its problem-plagued Wagerup refinery, a lawsuit instigated by US pollution crusader Erin Brockovich alleges.

The writ, obtained by *The Sunday Times*, and lodged in a US court last Friday, accuses Alcoa of knowingly and negligently poisoning surrounding communities with toxic emissions from its alumina facility 125km south of Perth.

The landmark civil action by former and present residents, with the help of Ms Brockovich and a US legal team, was revealed by the newspaper's PerthNow website on Friday.

Among other claims, the lawsuit alleges that:

- Before the plant was built landowners in the area were duped into selling their properties, thinking they were going to be used as a sunflower farm.

- Alcoa concealed the toxic dangers of its alumina refining operations.

- The company rented houses inside a buffer zone to transient residents, exposing them to contaminated land, air and water.

US law firm Caroselli Beachler McTiernan & Con-

boy filed the statement of claim on behalf of 10 WA plaintiffs in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where Alcoa has its head office.

The writ seeks an unspecified amount of damages.

Illnesses suffered by residents, including various cancers, heart complications, sinus and skin problems and even death, are cited in the lawsuit. The plaintiffs lived within 9km of the Wagerup refinery.

The US law firm, working in collaboration with Queensland firm Shine Lawyers, has also filed another four writs listing 240 local residents who say they too were made sick by refinery emissions.

Under the heading "Reckless Conduct and Disregard of Safety" the lawsuit states: "Alcoa is liable to Plaintiffs for its reckless, wilful and wanton misconduct in knowingly and intentionally exposing Plaintiffs and others in the surrounding communities, to toxic compounds and chemicals; intentionally concealing and misrepresenting the levels and dangerous characteristics of the various toxic chemicals and compounds it caused to be emitted in to the environment."

Alcoa, which is likely to be served with the writ this week, has refuted the allegations and vows to vigorously defend itself in court.

The company insists its operations are safe for both

employees and surrounding communities.

Alcoa is the world's leading producer of alumina, used to make aluminium. It has two other refineries in WA, one in Kwinana and another in Pinjarra. The production process is a dirty job involving the destruction of thousands of hectares of jarrah forest to access sub-soil which is then blasted with caustic solution to extract bauxite.

During the process more than 260 volatile and semi-volatile chemicals are released into the atmosphere.

Lawyer William Caroselli said Alcoa had put its bottom line and making money ahead of the safety of the environment and the public's health.

"As a result of their (Alcoa's) negligence and recklessness there are a lot of sick people who, through no fault of their own, are fated to lives full of illness, pain, and suffering. We intend to hold Alcoa accountable," Mr Caroselli told *The Sunday Times*.

Alcoa of Australia managing director Alan Cransberg responded: "We greatly value our local communities and we are proud of the work we do together. We do, and will continue to, operate in a safe and sustainable way."

Since the Wagerup plant's inception in 1984 the local community has complained of emissions, illness and

noise problems.

By the mid-1990s the installation of a liquid burner at the plant to better handle the poor quality of bauxite in the area saw health complaints skyrocket from just 40 to 1000 a year.

Proper pollution-control equipment initially was not installed on the liquid burner despite Alcoa being allegedly aware of hazards surrounding its use, the lawsuit says.

Last November a government report linked the smell of chemicals in the area with emissions from the plant.

Residents said the report finally confirmed what they had known all along — the plant's emissions were making them sick.

Last December the WA Department of Environment and Conservation charged Alcoa with causing pollution with criminal negligence.

The DEC claims Alcoa blanketed the community with a red dust — a residue of the refining process — that is loaded with toxic materials.

The company is due to face court in WA next month over the matter.

Lawyers say the suit filed this week may take years to be concluded.

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YOUR SAY WA 

Are you for or against Alcoa?

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BRIEF ENCOUNTER: Anti-pollution campaigner Erin Brockovich, centre, with residents she is defending, Vince Puccio and Cameron Auxer. Picture: COLIN MURTY. **BELOW:** The Alcoa refinery at Wagerup.



PLAINTIFFS

- Cameron B Auxer
- Francesco Antonio Anzellino
- Fiona Helen Blake
- Marie Patricia Cattach
- Anthony King Fordham
- Edward Charles Stewart Herring
- Glenys Joy Herring
- Miranda Jo Millstead
- Maria Vitale
- Ian Robert Young