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Residents sue over Sparrows Point pollution

Lawsuit seeks damages from steel mill, cement plant owners

By Timothy B. Wheeler, The Baltimore Sun

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Residents around Sparrows Point filed suit Thursday against the owners of the Baltimore County steel mill and a cement plant on the peninsula, contending that neighbors' health has been put at risk and their property contaminated by pollution from industrial activities there.

The suit, filed in Baltimore County Circuit Court, seeks damages from RG Steel and LaFarge North America for exposing surrounding residents to hazardous and carcinogenic air pollutants, a gritty dust called "kish" and "noxious stenches and odors."

Though only two residents were listed as plaintiffs, the complaint says it's on behalf of about 200 residents of Dundalk, Turners Station, Edgemere and other nearby communities. It also seeks to be treated as a class action for all nearby residents.

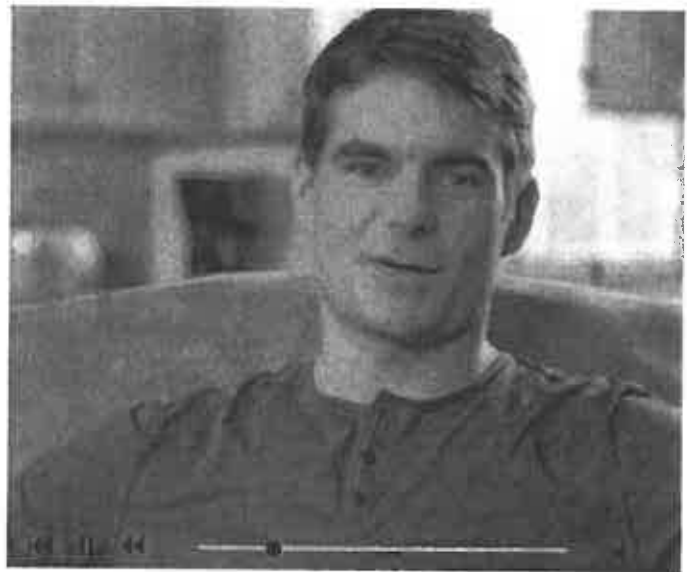
The legal action comes days after an industrial liquidation firm won the bidding for the century-old steel-making complex. The mill's current owner, RG Steel, filed for bankruptcy in May and the court must approve the sale.

A call and an email to the law firm representing RG Steel received no response. A spokeswoman for LaFarge said the Reston, Va.-based company does not comment on pending litigation. LaFarge makes cement from the steel mill's blast-furnace slag.

Normally, all litigation is stayed during bankruptcy proceedings. Bart Fisher, a Washington lawyer representing the residents, said they had been on the verge of going to court but held off when RG Steel filed for bankruptcy. They decided to go ahead now because the bankruptcy judge recently allowed a lawsuit filed by the Chesapeake Bay Foundation to proceed, he said.

The Annapolis-based environmental group is challenging a federal court's approval of the company's plan for investigating toxic pollution in waters around Sparrows Point, seeking to force RG Steel to expand its cleanup efforts. Fisher said that even though residents are seeking damages, they contend their case deserves to go forward as well because it's also about environmental harm.

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"We believe that the people there deserve to be compensated for the injury they've suffered as a result of Renco's continuing pollution," said Fisher, referring to the New York holding company that bought Sparrows Point and other steel mills under the name RG Steel.

State and federal environmental agencies recently filed objections to the sale of Sparrows Point, arguing that the auction notice did not adequately inform prospective bidders of their legal obligations under a 1997 consent agreement to clean up toxic pollution in and around the steel complex.

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