

Alcoa settles lawsuit concerning dust

BY TARA BOZICK - VICTORIA ADVOCATE

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POINT COMFORT - Kathy Warren would like for her hometown to remain an enjoyable place to live. When Point Comfort filed a lawsuit against Alcoa World Aluminum in January 2007, she knew the city was attempting to improve itself.

"I'm glad Point Comfort stood its ground on this," Warren said. "I'm really happy seeing the city stand up and trying to grow and attract people to Point Comfort."

When the city and Alcoa reached a compromise that would try to reduce air pollution emissions and help fix up the town, Warren was ecstatic. The city and Alcoa announced together on May 13 that they approved a settlement agreement to end the litigation, according to a news release written by both parties.

As a retiree of Alcoa who came to work for the aluminum company in 1975, Warren believes the company follows every federal and state guideline.

"I know how concerned the management in the plants are regarding the citizens in Point Comfort," Warren said.

As part of the agreement, Alcoa would reimburse the city for painting its water tower and would pledge to "make defined improvements to its processes that are aimed to reduce and abate emissions of white and red dust," according to agreement.

The agreement creates a Point Comfort Citizens' Panel that would improve communications between the city and Alcoa as well as "addressing concerns of the citizens of Point Comfort," the release stated.

The panel would initially include: the mayor, two city council members, the Alcoa plant manager and an Alcoa community affairs representative. Alcoa would fund the cost of a private facilitator.

Alcoa also would provide air monitoring and results to the city council and panel on a monthly basis, the news release stated.

The city of Point Comfort, represented by attorney Jim Blackburn from Houston, sued Alcoa for violations of the Clean Air Act, citing how both red and white alumina dust emissions exceeded permit limits for particulate matter, according to the original complaint. The complaint stated that strong winds caused the red dust to come from Alcoa's open-air "disposal pits" and that the white alumina dust came from the plant's calciner units.

The red dust "may contain residues harmful to human health, such as arsenic, chromium, selenium, radium 266 and-or thorium," the complaint stated. The city claimed the white dust attached to other emitted gases causing the dust and "corrosive substances" to settle on city buildings, vehicles and equipment, causing damage.

Alcoa denied the city's allegations in its answer to the complaint, filed in March 2007

Warren hopes the efforts stemming from the agreement will revitalize Point Comfort, a city with a population of about 780.

"We've always enjoyed living here," she said. "I'd like to see more people come in."

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