

Firms settle air quality suit

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CAMDEN

St. Lawrence Cement and a coalition of South Jersey industries have agreed to pay a total of approximately \$650,000 to former residents of a neighborhood near the cement company's plant.

Those 50 residents have been relocated by the state throughout the region since they filed actions in September 2001 in Superior Court against St. Lawrence Cement and South Jersey Port Corp., a quasi-state agency that leases space at Broadway Terminal in Camden to the Montreal-based manufacturer. The residents will receive \$10,000 per household and an additional \$5,000 for each individual resident.

Another 20 residents who live farther from the plant will receive \$2,000 each in exchange for agreeing to take no further action against the companies with regard to emissions. These residents will not receive a per-household payout.

When South Camden residents took their complaints of allergies and increased respiratory ailments to Superior Court in Camden, St. Lawrence responded by saying it alone could not be held responsible for the quality of South Camden's air. As a result, at least 20 other area companies were named third-party defendants, a decision that did not add to St. Lawrence's popularity with the local business community.

Michael Davis, senior vice president of the U.S. division of St. Lawrence -- and until recently manager of the Camden plant -- said his company, South Jersey Port Corp. and the other named businesses will share in the cost of the pre-trial settlement.

St. Lawrence has spent, on average, \$1 million a year in legal fees fighting what it argued are unsubstantiated health claims brought by neighbors, said Davis.

"We are pleased to be moving past this point and look forward to maintaining sound relationships with the Camden community," said Davis.



AL SCHELL/Courier-Post file
South Camden residents who lived near the St. Lawrence Cement plant will receive compensation under a settlement announced Tuesday.

ON THE WEB

St. Lawrence Cement Co.:
stlawrencecement.com

South Jersey Port Corp.:
southjerseyportcorp.com

Joseph Balzano, executive director of the Port Corp. who lobbied hard to bring St. Lawrence to a 13-acre site at Broadway, called the settlement "good news."

None of the residents -- who have been relocated from the neighborhood formerly known as The Terraces -- were immediately reachable late Tuesday when news of the settlement was released. Some portion of the settlement is expected to cover plaintiffs' legal fees.

Still pending against St. Lawrence is a federal suit filed by a citizens group and some individual residents who want the state to rescind St. Lawrence's air permit. This suit, filed by Olga Pomar of Camden Legal Services, claims the state is guilty of environmental injustice by approving an emission permit in a neighborhood already degraded by the county sewage treatment plant, a trash-to-steam operation, rail lines and a steady stream of trucks ferrying materials to and from the Camden port.

St. Lawrence expects the federal suit to go to trial "sometime this year," Davis said.

A publicly traded company and a subsidiary of the world's largest cement maker, St. Lawrence assured stockholders Tuesday that its share of the settlement will have no impact on the company's bottom line.

The Camden plant, which employs 22 people, produces an additive for cement from Italian slag. The company spent \$50 million building the Camden plant, and the South Jersey Port Corp. invested \$30 million in infrastructure using state-backed bonds.

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