## **\$5.5 million released to study how Tonawanda Coke's poisons affected neighbors**

## UB will track health of residents near plant

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After more than two years of waiting, advocates of a public health study into Tonawanda Coke's manufacturing operations got more than a simple approval last week.

They also received \$5.5 million to kick off 10 years of research to determine how the poisons that spewed from the plant affected residents' health in Tonawanda and Grand Island.

The federal judge who oversaw Tonawanda Coke's criminal trial and later fined the company millions of dollars filed an order last week releasing the first installment of money for the University at Buffalo study.

U.S. District Judge William M. Skretny also released \$711,161 for a separate soil study by UB.

"I don't think it's 100 percent sunk in yet," said Jackie James-Creedon, head of Citizen Science Community Resources, a Town of Tonawanda citizens group. "I'm still pinching myself."

Skretny's order came more than two years after a jury found Tonawanda Coke guilty of 14 criminal charges related to toxic emissions and the illegal handling of hazardous waste at its River Road plant in the Town of Tonawanda.

His order also follows a federal appeals court ruling that upheld those convictions and dismissed the company's contention that Skretny overstepped his bounds in ordering it to pay for the public health study.

The appeals court also upheld a \$12.5 million fine against Tonawanda Coke.

The appellate ruling set the stage for Skretny to release money, which the company has been paying and the court has set aside, for the "Tonawanda Health Study." Researchers will study the health of Tonawanda and Grand Island residents, the closest neighbors of the plant.

Public health researchers at UB say their study will go a long way toward answering questions about the effect of Tonawanda Coke's operations. The UB study will track the health of 38,000 residents, as well as current and former Tonawanda Coke employees.

"This is a unique opportunity to increase our understanding of the role that industrial exposures may have on health within communities," lead researcher Matthew Bonner, an epidemiologist and associate professor in UB's School of Public Health and Health Professions, said in a statement.

Two years in the works, the UB study will be broken down into three parts:

• Researchers will track up to 38,000 residents of the Town of Tonawanda, City of Tonawanda and Grand Island over the next 5 to 10 years with an eye toward monitoring their health;

• The health of Tonawanda Coke employees will be monitored with the goal of determining whether workers exposed to coke oven gas are more likely to die from diseases related to its use;

• An environmental health education center will be created in the community to help residents learn more about the study and serve as a resource for people seeking information on health and disease prevention issues.

Like the public health study, UB's soil study will give researchers unprecedented access to the Tonawanda Coke plant.

"This is an amazing and wonderful opportunity," said Joseph A. Gardella Jr., a UB chemistry professor who will help lead the effort.

Using samples from the River Road site, as well as samples from the backyards of residents in the Tonawandas and Grand Island and as far south as Kenmore and Riverside, researchers will try to determine if specific contaminants in those backyards are linked to Tonawanda Coke's emissions.

The soil samples will also help establish some geographic boundaries for the study, and help researchers identify "hot spots" – pockets of contamination in the communities around the plant that may or may not be linked to Tonawanda Coke

"We're trying to determine what if anything needs to be cleaned up and where," Gardella said.

Gardella, who has a long history of involvement in local environmental studies, thinks this one could generate "new science." He pointed to the new, more sophisticated research techniques being used in this study, and the involvement of state and federal environmental officials in monitoring the work.

At UB, Gardella said, the Tonawanda studies are viewed as top priorities, important enough that the university is absorbing the administrative costs associated with the studies and allowing all \$12.5 million in funding to go into research.

The second UB study, the soil investigation, would examine the environment in and around the company's River Road plant with an eye toward determining whether ground contamination levels are high enough to pose a health risk.

James-Creedon said the soil study could start as early as this fall and may begin with soil samples that attempt to determine the geographic boundaries of Tonawanda Coke's pollution.

The sentencing followed a four-week trial that included more than 30 witnesses, many of them former and current Tonawanda Coke employees, who testified about toxic emissions and the improper handling of hazardous waste. The testimony included accounts of a little-known pressure-release valve that spewed coke oven gas containing benzene into the air.

Prosecutors also accused the company of using cooling towers that lacked necessary antipollution equipment and of illegally disposing of coal tar sludge.