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Better Cleanup Planned at Former Chrome Plant

By MIREYA NAVARRO

JERSEY CITY — Some 25 years ago, Ellen Wright was driving home through her neighborhood of single-family wood-frame houses here when she noticed that the streets were slick with “green water.”

“It was a terrible thing,” said Mrs. Wright, now 77, recalling her unease.

The liquid turned out to be runoff from the site of a former chrome production plant that operated for decades in Jersey City in Hudson County, once a major center for the nation’s chromium ore processing and manufacturing industry. Residents like Mrs. Wright, who were already organizing through their churches to demand better police protection and other basic community services, decided to take on the polluters.

It took years, but they won — so far, twice.

Under a federal court settlement announced on Tuesday, PPG Industries of Pittsburgh has again committed itself to removing chromium waste from a 17-acre site in a densely populated area of Jersey City where the company and its predecessors ran a chromium manufacturing complex from 1924 to 1963. The project includes pollution that reached homes in the neighborhood. The new deal sets a higher standard for the cleanup than was previously agreed to.

The property, near the Holland Tunnel and a stone’s throw away from two-family homes and a health clinic, is one of the last major sites in New Jersey contaminated with hexavalent chromium still to be addressed. The [Environmental Protection Agency](#) describes hexavalent chromium as a human carcinogen.

The settlement resolves a citizens’ lawsuit filed in 2009 in Federal District Court by the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) and two community groups — the Interfaith Community Organization and the Graco Community Organization — whose members had been fighting for the removal of chromium waste from their mostly African-American neighborhoods since the

1980s.

Cleanup began at the site recently under the supervision of the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection as a result of an earlier court settlement. The new settlement calls for a more stringent cleanup than required by the state. It also requires PPG to pay for an expert hired by the community to monitor the progress.

Jeremy Neuhart, a PPG spokesman, called the settlement “a positive development” that reflected a decision by the plaintiffs to focus “on remediation rather than litigation.”

For the church-based Interfaith Community Organization, it is a second legal victory; it was also a plaintiff in a case that ended in a 2003 federal judgment forcing Honeywell International to clean up another legacy of Jersey City’s industrial past: 34 acres that had been used as a dumping ground for chromium along the waterfront.

The group, now part of an interfaith organization called New Jersey Together, went to court after years of what it viewed as foot-dragging by companies and the state on cleanups mandated under previous agreements with the Department of Environmental Protection. Some of the group’s members contend that their willingness to go to court provided the pressure needed for the state to reach its own, earlier court settlement with PPG.

“When a company leaves a community, it shouldn’t leave behind an open wound,” the Rev. Willard W. C. Ashley Sr., co-chairman of the Interfaith Community Organization, told his congregation at Abundant Joy Community Church in Jersey City at a recent Sunday service.

“Our goal has been very simple: less death and more life — new life for Jersey City ,” he said to a chorus of “Yeah!” and “Amen!” “We wanted a complete cleanup so that fewer people in our community would get cancer. It means new development, new jobs.”

Yet Lawrence Hajna, a spokesman for the state environmental department, played down the significance of the latest settlement. An earlier one, he said, “calls for complete excavation; It doesn’t get much better than that.”

New Jersey officials have identified more than 160 sites in Hudson County, most of them in Jersey City, contaminated by chromium. Most of it came from the production of coatings for machine parts and from chromium-laced waste used as fill material in construction in the 1950s and the 1960s.

Ingesting and inhaling hexavalent chromium, the most toxic form, through air and water can result in lung and intestinal cancers and other health problems.

Lawyers for the plaintiffs said the settlement, which will become final when signed by a federal judge, does not interfere with other pending legal claims. They include a class-action lawsuit filed in May in state court against both Honeywell and PPG seeking compensation for landowners whose properties have been devalued and payments for regular medical screenings.

In the years since Mrs. Wright first spotted the green liquid, she said, the fight has taught her that “you don’t have to take what they give you.”

“You can organize,” she continued. “It makes a difference.”

Mrs. Wright, a founder of the Interfaith Community Organization, and her husband, Melvin, 80, raised two sons in the five-bedroom house where they have lived for 45 years in the Bergen-Lafayette section of Jersey City, just a few blocks from the former PPG site.

They have been talking about moving to a smaller place, but first Mrs. Wright wants her backyard, whose soil tested positive for chromium exceeding safe levels a few years ago, cleaned up under the terms of the settlement. “I’m old,” she said, but “I’m thinking about the kids.”