

# Australia: Lack of monitoring highlights health dangers at Alcoa plants

By Celeste Lopez  
18 June 2003

The Western Australian Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the state government's environmental watchdog, has admitted that smelting giant Alcoa has deliberately covered up the extent of toxic emissions from its Wagerup plant in the state's southwest.

Following the release of an environment audit report, DEP acting director of environmental regulation Robert Atkins said in late May: "We sent the auditor in (to the Alcoa plant) and he has found that the monitoring is flawed and we'll be ensuring that Alcoa changes its practices. If the monitoring is flawed, everyone has been misled to a certain extent".

The report's release was held up for three months while Alcoa insisted on checking the draft for "factual errors". Despite Alcoa's efforts to vet the report, it revealed 110 flaws in monitoring, including a failure to test for volatile organic compounds in the ambient air outside the refinery.

The company's motive is obvious: it wants to play down the extent of emissions as it presses for permission for a \$1 billion expansion to boost output from 2.3 to 3.5 million tonnes of alumina a year. Alcoa, which is the world's largest producer of alumina, has three plants in Western Australia—at Wagerup, Kwinana and Pinjarra—as well as operations in other Australian states.

The results of the audit highlight the limited role played by the government and its environmental watchdog. The DEP does not carry out any monitoring of its own but relies on Alcoa to provide figures on emission levels. The DEP has simply accepted Alcoa's faulty figures and, in effect, issued licences to continue to pollute—with potentially fatal consequences for local residents and employees.

While the government and the DEP claim to have

been "misled" by the company, the results of the latest audit come as no surprise to residents living close to Alcoa's plants at Wagerup and Kwinana or their employees. For years, they have battled the company, successive state governments, the DEP and the Department of Minerals and Energy, demanding action on the emissions. Residents in Wagerup pressed for the government to carry out an audit before giving the go-ahead for any expansion to the plant.

The potential dangers were underscored last August, when the families of workers who had been employed at the Kwinana plant, released a list of Alcoa employees who had died or become ill since working in a section known as Department K58. Department K58 is a group of buildings (numbered 45,46,48,50 and 60) that include an oxalate kiln and Liquor Burning Unit (LBU) which began operation in 1988. Alcoa has been aware since at least 1990 that the LBU was emitting carbon monoxide and benzene, a "category A" carcinogen.

The document was published in the *Western Australian* on August 31 and dubbed the "Death List". It originally contained the names of 10 workers who died since 1998 and some 25 former workers who became ill. Their ailments included cancer, coronary disorders and respiratory problems, as well as multiple chemical sensitivity and chronic fatigue syndrome.

The shocking details fuelled public anger, not only in the towns near the Alcoa plants but more broadly. As a result, the wives of other deceased Alcoa workers came forward and added their husband's names to the list. All of those listed, including employees and contractors, worked at the plant since the 1970s and also worked in K58. They included:

**Ralph Howell:** Died of lung cancer in January 1998 aged 40. He was an operator in buildings 45 and 46. A

moderate smoker, he worked at Kwinana from the mid-1980s. Prior to his death he expressed fears that he and other workers were being exposed to potentially dangerous chemicals.

**Neil Lister:** Died July 2002 aged 62. A mechanical engineer who worked on the liquor burning unit, he joined the company in 1971 and left in 1996. In 1991 he was diagnosed with chronic lymphatic leukemia and his immune system was severely affected. He was one of three former workers who were diagnosed with the same disease.

**Greg Capes:** Died of a massive heart attack in January 1999. The non-smoker worked for 10 years as a maintenance fitter, including in buildings 45 and 46, until he suffered an angina attack at work in October 1998. His arteries were badly blocked and a stent was inserted. He died while on holiday at Rottnest Island.

**Les Devaney:** Died in 1998 of leukemia, which had spread to the lymph system. A reformed smoker aged in his early 70s, he was an operator in building 46 and one of Alcoa's longest serving employees.

**John Breed:** Worked at Alcoa for 24 years and died suddenly from sinus cancer in May 2002. (See interview with his wife Anna Breed).

The list of those who are ill or dying is also shocking. Their names have been withheld.

**Worker 5:** Aged 62, a former operator in 45, collapsed in 1996 overcome by fumes. A reformed smoker, he suffers lung problems, body shakes and is sensitive to chemicals. Alcoa employed him for 25 years and paid him out.

**Worker 14:** Aged 58, joined Alcoa in 1971 and left in 1996 after he was diagnosed with chronic lymphatic leukemia. His spleen was removed in May. He was employed as an electrical engineer in powerhouse maintenance before becoming an electrical coordinator. His duties included maintaining the liquor burner. The company refused his request for a payout.

**Worker 15:** Aged 68, a former storeman from 1970 to 1986 was diagnosed earlier this year with the same lymphoma as his next-door neighbour—also an Alcoa worker. He took early retirement following a staff redundancy program. He was a moderate smoker who quit in 1986.

The list reinforced evidence from other investigations of the dangers to health posed by emissions from the Alcoa plants. A *Healthwise* study conducted by a group

of academics at the University of Western Australia (UWA) and Monash University into the health of Alcoa workers was released last June.

Alcoa funded the study and the team leader, UWA epidemiologist Lin Fritschi, said the findings were “not alarming”. Nevertheless, the national survey of 11,000 Alcoa workers at plants in Victoria and Western Australia found higher than average rates of respiratory pleural cancer, melanomas and mesothelioma. The study did not include retired Alcoa workers or contract workers.

Other studies point to high rates of serious health problems among Alcoa contractors. The results of tests conducted by Adelaide-based Environmental and Genetic Solutions on seven former Alcoa contractors in 1999 and published in May 2002 found that six suffered “extraordinarily high rates of genetic damage caused by exposure to toxic and clastogenic (chromosome-breaking) chemicals”.

Geneticist Judith Ford wrote: “The tests and the results demonstrate serious damage to their genetic material and to their immune system. Taken together, these results indicate that these men have a high risk of cancer now or at some future date. I consider that these men have a lifetime disability that has occurred as a result of their toxic chemical exposure.”

The growing body of evidence vindicating the concerns expressed by residents and workers highlights the ongoing failure of government and government bodies to insist that Alcoa spend the money necessary to adequately monitor and control emissions and the health dangers posed.

To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>