

Futureye In the Public Eye

ACTIVISTS TIP A BUCKET ON BIG COMPANIES

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High profile activist, Erin Brockovich, took community grassroots activism to a new level last week when she flew into Western Australia to investigate the possibility of a class action against Alcoa for alleged Wagerup refinery pollution.

Brockovich, immortalised by Julia Roberts in the 1996 movie bearing her name, attracted huge media coverage by describing the area around Wagerup as "lethal" and too dangerous for her to visit.

Her dramatic accusations conjured up images of corporate irresponsibility and government ineptitude, which, for many Australians, raised two very important questions. First, what about the people who have to live near such refineries, and second, why isn't the government protecting them?

In the old days, when you lived near a big smelter or mine, you were happy because it gave your family an income, and environmentalists were just 'dole-bludging hippies'. Time passed, and people started getting sick, but experts came in and told you everything was fine. Because they were from the Environment Protection Agency, you trusted them and got on with the job.

But then people started to think differently, and trust differently. And it's not just Alcoa that's in trouble.

This Friday, a small community group from Geelong is taking the EPA all the way to the Supreme Court in a landmark case around Shell Australia's Corio Bay oil refinery in Geelong.

"When the EPA started questioning Shell's emissions in 2003, we were completely shocked. Shell actually admitted that they had never complied with their licence conditions, and wouldn't be able to do so for another 15 years," local activist, Sue McLean, says.

"Though they were threatening Shell with prosecution, the fact is that the EPA had done nothing about ongoing breaches since 1973."

At the time, the Executive Director of Environment Victoria was quoted as saying that there was "a bit of a sympathetic culture to business" inside the authority. McLean agrees: "The EPA is a perfect example of the

corporate capture of government that is all too common these days."

In 2004, the EPA imposed tougher licence conditions on Shell. But two years later, the refinery was unable to meet its benzene emissions target and the EPA granted an amendment - in effect giving them six more years to comply. The Geelong Community for Good Life action group alleges the amendment gives Shell "carte blanche" to pollute the air and waterways around Geelong, and is taking to the courts to challenge it.

"The EPA put out monitoring 'reports' to the community which made flowery scientifically unsubstantiated statements like 'Corio air given the thumbs up!' when we knew that a large number of pollutants were not even being monitored," says McLean.

Similar concerns are being expressed around the country.

In Tasmania, the tourism industry does not believe the State's proposed EPA will "have the teeth" to police the Gunns pulp mill. Three Wishes Vineyard owner, Peter Whish-Wilson, was unequivocal: "We don't trust the state Labor Government."

In Mount Isa, residents are worried about lead-in-blood, and accuse the Queensland EPA of failing to conduct proper soil testing in the area for the past 16 years. A few hours south in Townsville, locals are concerned about emissions from Queensland Nickel's smoke stack.

"I contacted the Environmental Protection Agency who said that these were normal startup emissions and that the EPA would not be doing any testing. Apparently the EPA will rely on Queensland Nickel to monitor its own emissions and advise the EPA if allowable limits are exceeded," says local, John Boucher.

Like Sue McLean, John Boucher doesn't think self-policing is good enough.

"The EPA say the smoke is normal particulate matter from Yabulu, but I would like to know what the particles are - mercury, arsenic, cadmium, lead or whatever else," Boucher said. "We will

