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HEADLINE: FAMILIES' LAWSUIT TARGETING FACTORY'S CONTAMINATION IS SETTLED;
HEALTH: PLAINTIFFS WILL COLLECT ABOUT \$2 MILLION FROM COMPANY THAT STATE SAYS POLLUTED A SCHOOL IN BELL GARDENS.

BYLINE: ANTONIO OLIVO, TIMES STAFF WRITER

BODY:

After more than a year of legal action involving toxic contamination at Suva Elementary and Intermediate School in Bell Gardens, plaintiffs' lawyers will announce today that they have reached a settlement in their lawsuit against Chrome Crankshaft Co.

The settlement is estimated to be about \$ 2 million, although neither side can disclose the exact amount. Plaintiffs like Beverly Brock say that the money--which will be split with 7 other families--is enough to get her out of Bell Gardens.

Brock, 39, will move to East Los Angeles with her share of the settlement.

The company--which recently changed its name to Locomotive Air Services--was sued by the families and Communities for a Better Environment, which also settled last week.

Brock--who has leukemia--and the others have sought a way out of the city or some means of making the environment safer.

They were horrified to learn that the company's factory--closed as the state investigates the extent of the contamination there--had been polluting the school next door for decades.

Convinced that their suffering was no coincidence, several families struck by cancer and other ailments pursued action against Chrome Crankshaft in 1998.

"It's been really hard," said Brock, who has spent most of her life near the contamination first detected by the state in soil and ground water at Suva and the

With her leukemia in remission, "we've all been through a lot. I'm not comfortable living here."

Nonetheless, they see the settlement as a push toward healing.

In exchange for the dismissal of both cases, the company--a cleaner of locomotive parts that is a subsidiary of Illinois-based Amsted Industries--has agreed to pay the families an amount close to its total worth in assets.

Both sides were prohibited by court order from commenting on a specific amount. But a source close to the case said the company is estimated to be worth about \$ 2.5 million.

The company also agreed in the settlement to abandon the chrome plating portion of its operations and to donate \$ 25,000 to the Rose Foundation, an agency that finances environmental awareness projects.

Lawyers for Chrome Crankshaft could not be reached for comment Friday. **Gideon Kracov**, who represented the families, said he was happy with the settlement, but frustrated that the company could not have been punished more severely.

Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Thomas McKnew would not allow the plaintiffs to include parent company Amsted Industries in the lawsuit. That company is worth billions, **Kracov** said.

The settlement "was a nice success in the litigation sense," **Kracov** said. "But it also highlights how difficult these problems are to resolve."

For instance, though state officials still do not know whether a full cleanup is necessary, the settlement has drained Chrome Crankshaft's financial ability to foot the bill.

State officials may now have to pay, which means that getting rid of the contamination at the site could take longer, said Hamid Saebfar, an administrator at the Department of Toxic Substances Control.

In that scenario, "we would prioritize this site with other sites and deal with it on that basis," Saebfar said. "But our funds are limited."

Even so, Mary Salcedo, whose 16-year-old son Joseph Gamez died of brain cancer four years ago Tuesday, said the settlement sends a message to other companies to clean up their act. It also should inspire other affected communities to fight for environmental justice, she said.

Pausing to consider what that term means, Salcedo added: "That's not really going to make things better for me because it's never going to bring my son back."

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