

## **Public Statement on Civil Penalty Levied on Shell Cracker Plant (Beaver County, PA) by PA DEP for Air Pollution Violations**

**May 26, 2023**

### **Background**

Shell Chemical Appalachia LLC—a subsidiary of the British oil and gas company Shell—has agreed to pay nearly \$10 million to resolve claims from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) that Shell polluted the air around its new ethane cracker plant in Beaver County, Pennsylvania. The sprawling industrial complex situated along the Ohio River, 30 miles west of Pittsburgh, converts ethane, a component of methane gas fracked in Southwestern Pennsylvania, into polyethylene, a common plastic. The plant is scheduled to produce 3.5 billion pounds of plastic a year.

Under the terms of the agreement, Shell will pay a civil penalty of \$4.9 million, 25 percent of which will be directed to local communities. The company will spend another \$5 million on environmental projects in local communities. Shell has already said that, as the plant ramps up production, it would likely continue to exceed air emissions limits throughout the year. Any future violations will require Shell to pay additional civil penalties.

Shell opened the cracker plant in November 2022 but suspended operations in March 2023 after identifying a problem with a system designed to burn off excess gases. The plant violated rolling 12-month emission limits for volatile organic compounds, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, and other hazardous pollutants. Shell also exceeded limits on emissions from the flaring process and, in a separate incident, released benzene, after which workers at the plant reported health issues. Since the beginning of 2022, the DEP has issued more than a dozen air violations to the plant.

### ***Environmental Health Project Statement***

The Environmental Health Project recognizes the serious health concerns the Shell cracker plant presents for people living nearby and for all of us who are impacted by climate change. The toxic chemicals that cracker plants release have been associated with a host of serious health issues, including increased rates of asthma, lung and respiratory infections, heart problems, poor birth outcomes, and neurological issues such as memory impairment. In large enough doses over time, many of these chemicals can cause cancer.

Making corporations pay for environmental damages may seem like a positive development. In this case, however, the penalty levied on a giant multinational corporation amounts to only a mild rebuke. The \$10 million Shell has committed to paying doesn't begin to cover the cost of added healthcare, increased hospitalizations, and premature deaths that pollution from the plant has likely already caused or will cause

in the future, with the highest toll falling on nearby residents and those living in areas where methane gas is extracted.

Further, rising emissions from the Shell plastics cracker plant—along with proposals to build a methane-fed hydrogen hub in the Pennsylvania-Ohio-West Virginia region—put our waterways at risk. Our rivers, sources of public water supplies and recreation, are fragile ecosystems that cannot easily support intrusions of toxic substances. Additionally, large industrial complexes contribute mightily to greenhouse gas emissions that warm the planet. Climate change spawns a worsening of the storms, droughts, fires, heat waves, and other extreme weather events we see nearly every day, all of which impact public health. Higher temperatures increase the likelihood of respiratory illnesses, heart problems, insect-borne diseases, and heat-associated deaths.

To better protect public health, stricter pollution controls on existing sources of industrial emissions, such as the Shell cracker plant, are needed immediately. In the long term, only a transition away from fossil fuels and toward renewable energies, taking into account considerations for environmental justice communities, will offer the public health protections residents of Southwestern Pennsylvania and people across the globe deserve.

**Alison L. Steele, Executive Director**  
**Environmental Health Project**