

## SAN FRANCISCO

# A Fight Over Century-Old Toxic Legacy in San Francisco

Under San Francisco's picturesque waterfront lies a hidden legacy, that some fear could be a ticking toxic time-bomb.

By [Jaxon Van Derbeken](#) • Published June 29, 2022 • Updated on June 29, 2022 at 8:00 pm

Under San Francisco's picturesque waterfront lies a hidden legacy, that some fear could be a ticking toxic time-bomb. Jaxon Van Derbeken reports.

Dan Clarke has spent more than a decade fighting to rid his beloved Marina District of a hidden toxic legacy.

"The Marina of San Francisco is one of the best areas you could possibly live in," said Clarke, a retired engineer who is now 79. Clarke said he'd always wondered what was in the strange crumbling rocks he found in his backyard on North Point Street.

Then, in 2020, he got an answer. A letter from PG&E. Representatives also "came into the neighborhood and said they were looking to investigate these manufactured gas plants to see if there was any possible problem with them."

Clarke took the crumbly rocks he dug up from his yard to PG&E for testing. Tests confirmed they were so-called clinker rocks – the telltale toxic waste left by what once was a 9-acre gas manufacturing plant. The plants operated in the late 19th and early 20th century, heating oil and coal to derive an invisible gas used to light and warm homes. Photos from the 19th century show the two Marina plants' distinctive gas storage tanks.

The North Beach plant where Clarke's home was later built was run by San Francisco Gaslight Co., which later became PG&E, until it was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake.

"The whole plant was a nightmare," Clarke said. "My home was set between some of the buildings that did the scrubbing, the cleaning of the gas."

The North Beach plant, as well as the Fillmore plant – built on land now occupied by Marina Middle School, didn't just leave behind rocks. They also left black, tar-like goo. Today, the toxic residue from that goo bubbles up at a boomed off part of the Marina Small Craft Harbor, near Marina Green, in an area once known as Gashouse Cove. The city has entered into a cleanup agreement with PG&E for that Gashouse Cove site, which was once a dock to receive raw materials for the North Beach plant.

Allen Hatheway, a geological engineer, has spent decades documenting some 50,000 manufactured gas plant sites in the U.S. The current official number from the Environmental Protection Agency is 5,000. No matter the true number, Hatheway says all the former gasworks sites have something in common.

"The nature of the gas is toxic," he said. "It's a public health threat -- every gasworks that existed, there was a gasworks dump --and those are dangerous today."

Just how dangerous is disputed.

PG&E maintains the material left on and near the 42 sites across its territory doesn't pose a risk, because it's buried.

Even though PG&E took over companies that formerly operated the plants, the courts have held it liable for testing and cleanup of the contamination dating as far back as the late 1800s until as recently as the 1950s.

Although tests have found lead and other heavy metals on gasworks sites, Hatheway says the biggest toxic legacy is a class of chemicals known as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons. The chemicals have been tied to cancer and birth defects and can linger in the ground for decades, polluting groundwater. Tests done to date show elevated levels beyond federal standards in the two plants in the Marina. The fear is that residual vapors from the waste can seep into homes and contaminated groundwater can flow into the Bay.

The state toxic substances control agency says 30 properties in the Marina area have been addressed so far as part of a program in place since 2012, either by removing contaminated soil or through installing vapor recovery systems.

But Clarke, along with the San Francisco Herring Association, sued to force PG&E to account for possible pollution across a 33-block area of the Marina. And after Clarke sued again, the same judge who oversaw the earlier case recently found PG&E potentially liable for a site outside the Marina – one in Fisherman’s Wharf, where the Argonaut Hotel stands.

In a statement, PG&E stressed there’s “no reason” for any health concern from the material. It says it’s started testing and cleaning the sites to satisfy “today’s regulatory standards” and to meet its public safety and environmental responsibilities.

While it still denies its liable for the Fisherman’s Wharf site, the utility said it respects the court’s ruling that it may have “some responsibility” for cleanup of the so-called Cannery site. The company said it is currently working to evaluate the area.

Even with his victories in court, Clarke acknowledges the battle has taken a toll.

“I was just exhausted. It was and still is, an exhausting process,” he said. “They fight you every inch of the way.”

Back in 2014, Clarke sold his home to PG&E. As many as a dozen of his neighbors have done the same. Clarke now lives in Hillsborough.

Meanwhile, PG&E has told federal regulators it could take half a billion dollars more to clean up the 42 sites across its territory – with the cost largely borne by ratepayers.