

Appendix D: Additional Smelter Impact Case Studies

ASARCO Smelter, El Paso, Texas

Once called “Smelertown”, El Paso, Texas had no tracking of tailings and mining wastes. Material was dumped illegally in fields. The EPA closed the smelter and ordered immediate remediation due to high levels of lead and arsenic.¹⁵⁵ However, the majority of the smelter’s ash plume was oriented to the south, impacting Juarez, Mexico, less than half a mile away from the smelter. Juarez was not included in the environmental remediation.¹⁵⁶

ASARCO Smelter, City of Tacoma, United States

Operating from the early 1900s, the ASARCO smelter in Tacoma was once the world’s largest copper smelter (1975)¹⁵⁷ before it contaminated 1,000 sq. km. of the Puget Sound region with elevated levels of arsenic, lead and other heavy metals.¹⁵⁸ The soils of nearby Vashon Island are still contaminated to such an extent that the EPA has warned residents against eating garden grown vegetables.¹⁵⁹ The smelter was closed and remediation of the Superfund site is being completed. It is one of 20 sites that ASARCO manages. In 2009, after a legal battle, ASARCO agreed to pay \$94.6 million for the City of Tacoma’s restoration of the smelter site.¹⁶⁰ The wider remediation has involved digging up all of the topsoil in many neighborhoods of the city.

Chemetco, City of Hartford, Illinois

With a peak production of nearly 120,000 tons of copper production per year in the early 1990’s, Chemetco produced roughly half of all US copper production.¹⁶¹ However, the company emitted more airborne lead than any other firm in the US.¹⁶² Chemetco was convicted of evading and violating environmental protection laws. A surprise EPA inspection uncovered a hidden pipe discharging high levels of zinc oxide, lead, cadmium and other regulated hazardous materials directly into Long Lake, a tributary of the Mississippi River.¹⁶³ Court proceedings showed that with every rainfall, over 1,500 gallons of hazardous waste sludge was pumped from the smelter into the Mississippi River.¹⁶⁴ Ultimately, lower profitability, an aging smelter, and legal battles led to bankruptcy and closure of the smelter.

Kabwe, Zambia

Kabwe translates to “Smelting Place,” a fitting name for a site that produced roughly 7,600 metric tons of copper ore annually at its peak during the 1970’s. Eventually, declining ore grades and poor maintenance led to the uneconomical plant’s closure in 1994. During its lifetime, the plant operated without pollution standards. No plans were made for remediation. The plant site continues to leach arsenic, lead, and chromium into the soil and water. With the closure of the smelter, “artisanal smelting” has developed. People manually smelt ore, risking their own and the community’s health with ongoing and unregulated or unmonitored hazardous material discharges.¹⁶⁵ Much of this work is performed by children.¹⁶⁶