U.S. Steel’s Clairton Plant is the largest coke works in North America. Every day, it produces 10,000 tons of coke, a key component of steelmaking. It also produces a large amount of air pollution, and has made the air near Pittsburgh some of the worst in the United States. An air monitor one mile from the Clairton plant has some of the highest sulfur dioxide levels of any city in the country, and the area’s air has the highest levels of fine particles, which can lodge themselves deep in the lungs, anywhere east of the Rockies. A Dec. 24, 2018 fire knocked out the plant’s pollution control system, causing it to release five times the amount of sulfur pollution as it is permitted to do, according to Allegheny County. Thousands of residents complained. On April 5, the plant’s air pollution controls were put back in service.

Top sulfur dioxide emitters in Pennsylvania
2016 (in tons)

Though Clairton and U.S. Steel’s other plants near Pittsburgh are the largest source of sulfur dioxide in Allegheny County, many other facilities in Pennsylvania emit SO2 into the ambient air. Most sulfur dioxide comes from fossil fuel combustion, and coal plants are some of the biggest sources in the state.

Since October 2014, Clairton has been fined $6.65 million for 39 enforcement actions. U.S. Steel has appealed two recent fines totaling $1.6 million.

Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; published reports

Infographic by Reid Frazier, StateImpact Pennsylvania and The Allegheny Front/Tom Downing, WITF