Wake up and Smell the Smog: The Third Circuit Provides Clarity on CERCLA's Federally Permitted Release Reporting Exemption in Clean Air Council v. United States Steel Corp.

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WAKE UP AND SMELL THE SMOG: 
THE THIRD CIRCUIT PROVIDES CLARITY ON CERCLA’S 
FEDERALLY PERMITTED RELEASE REPORTING EXEMPTION 
IN CLEAN AIR COUNCIL V. UNITED STATES STEEL CORP.

I. LET’S CLEAR THE AIR: AN INTRODUCTION TO REPORTING 
REQUIREMENTS AFTER CAA-GOVERNED AIR POLLUTANT 
RELEASES IN STEEL PRODUCTION PROCESS

Coke-oven emissions from steel production pose substantial public health concerns. In the initial stages, steel production requires processing raw coal into coke, which produces coke-oven gas as a by-product. Burning raw, uncleaned coke-oven gas emits benzene and other hazardous pollutants into the air. These emissions pose carcinogenic and other health risks to humans.

To protect the public from harmful airborne contaminants, the Clean Air Act (CAA) requires states adopt state implementation plans (SIPs) to achieve National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS). SIPs consist of control measures and regulations a state must use to meet and maintain NAAQS. Pennsylvania’s SIP specif—


2. See Coke Making Process, U.S. Steel Mon Valley Works, https://monvalley.us.com/uss/portal/monvalley/monvalleyworks/cokemakingprocess/tut/p/zl/04_Sj9CPyksx0xPLMnMz0bMAtKjo8zILQ0MnB2dDB0NDFx9HQ0Cgw0NLd0 CwgdXEw0_Ep8DYy0I8iRr8Bdu8BhlP4oiEp8gkzwKwA7EawAjxsKckMj DD19FQEEH33r/dz/d5/L2dBISEvZ0FBIS9nQSEh/ (last visited Sept. 6, 2021) (explaining coke-oven gas is by-product of igniting “bituminous” coal).


6. Id. (explaining goal of SIPs).
ically leaves the enforcement of emissions and reporting standards to local authorities.\(^7\) In Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, the relevant authority is the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD).\(^8\)

If an Allegheny County-based “major source” breakdown has a “substantial likelihood of causing the emission of air contaminants in violation of [the] [Pennsylvania SIP]” the source must submit a detailed notice to the ACHD.\(^9\) Federal law also requires the polluting source to report those incidents to the U.S. Coast Guard’s National Response Center (NRC).\(^10\) Such federal reporting requirements, however, are subject to certain exemptions.\(^11\)

In *Clean Air Council v. U.S. Steel*,\(^12\) the Third Circuit directly addressed these federal reporting requirements and exemptions following a pollution event in Allegheny County.\(^13\) The environmental watchdog group Clean Air Council (CAC) sued U.S. Steel alleging the corporation did not comply with its federal reporting obligations after emitting high levels of raw coke-oven gas.\(^14\) The Third Circuit held that because U.S. Steel operated under a CAA permit, its emissions were exempt from federal reporting.\(^15\) The opinion ultimately provides federal courts with a

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7. See 40 C.F.R. § 52.2020(c)(2) (2022) (stating local regulators handle SIP violations).
8. Id. (outlining entity managing SIP violations in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania).
9. See County of Allegheny, Pa., Ordinance No. 16782, and Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) Rules and Regulations, Art. XXI Air Pollution Control, § 2108.01(c)(1), (2) (1994) (summarizing reporting requirements for pollution control equipment breakdowns that have substantial likelihood of air contaminant emissions); see also Summary of the Clean Air Act, U.S. ENV’T PROT. AGENCY, https://www.epa.gov/laws-regulations/summary-clean-air-act (Sept. 28, 2021) (categorizing sources of hazardous air pollutants). According to the EPA, a major source is “a stationary source or a group of stationary sources that emit or have the potential to emit 10 tons per year or more of a hazardous air pollutant or 25 tons per year or more of a combination of hazardous air pollutants.” Id. (defining major source).
10. 42 U.S.C. § 9603(a) (describing NRC reporting requirements for onshore facilities emitting hazardous substances in quantities prohibited under § 9602(a)).
11. See id. (stating “federally permitted release[s]” are exempt from reporting requirements).
12. 4 F.4th 204, 207 (3d Cir. 2021) (evaluating reporting requirements and exemptions).
13. For a discussion of *Clean Air Council’s* facts, see infra notes 23-42 and accompanying text.
15. Id. at 211 (summarizing court’s holding).
clearer picture of a major source’s compliance obligations after a pollution event.16

This Note examines the Third Circuit’s decision and the potential impact of less stringent reporting requirements.17 Part II discusses the facts and procedural history of Clean Air Council.18 Part III provides the dispute’s legal background.19 Part IV outlines the Third Circuit’s reasoning in arriving at its holding.20 Part V offers a critical analysis of the Third Circuit’s opinion.21 Lastly, Part VI examines the potential impact Clean Air Council will have on pollution reporting requirements, accountability for polluting sources, and air quality in Allegheny County.22

II. AIR POLLUTION PROBLEM IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA: THE FACTS OF CLEAN AIR COUNCIL

U.S. Steel operates Mon Valley Works, which consists of three steel facilities located throughout Allegheny County, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.23 The three Mon Valley Works facilities—the Clairton Plant, the Edgar Thomson Plant, and the Irvin Plant—each play a specific role in the steel production process.24 The Clairton Plant first processes raw coal into coke, the Edgar Thomson Plant then uses the coke to make steel, and the Irvin Plant finishes the steel.25


17. For a discussion of Clean Air Council’s impact, see infra notes 183-99 and accompanying text.

18. For a discussion of the facts and procedural history of Clean Air Council, see infra notes 23-42 and accompanying text.

19. For a discussion of the legal framework underlying the Clean Air Council opinion, see infra notes 43-128 and accompanying text.

20. For a discussion of a step-by-step analysis of the Third Circuit’s holding in Clean Air Council, see infra notes 129-56 and accompanying text.

21. For a critical analysis of the Third Circuit’s reasoning in Clean Air Council, see infra notes 157-82 and accompanying text.

22. For a discussion of the potential impact of Clean Air Council on environmental law moving forward, see infra notes 183-99 and accompanying text.


24. Id. (summarizing three plants of Mon Valley Works near Pittsburgh).

25. Id. (explaining steel making process at Mon Valley Works).
When the Clairton Plant processes raw coal into coke, it produces coke-oven gas as a by-product.\textsuperscript{26} If raw coke-oven gas is burned without undergoing a cleaning process, it “belches benzene, hydrogen sulfide, and other pollutants into the air.”\textsuperscript{27} To prevent the belching of such pollutants, the Clairton Plant cleans the raw coke-oven gas before the other plants subsequently use it.\textsuperscript{28}

In December 2018 and June 2019, the Clairton Plant’s control rooms were shut down and offline for months due to fires.\textsuperscript{29} Despite the offline control rooms, U.S. Steel continued to burn raw coke-oven gas as fuel for steel production.\textsuperscript{30} Pollutants were subsequently emitted into the air.\textsuperscript{31} U.S. Steel reported the emissions and control room fires to the ACHD in compliance with its CAA Title V permits and regulations.\textsuperscript{32}

CAC sued U.S. Steel in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{33} It argued U.S. Steel should have reported the pollution to the NRC pursuant to CERCLA.\textsuperscript{34} CAC also asserted that the emissions were not “federally permitted releases” under 42 U.S.C. § 9603(a).\textsuperscript{35} In response, U.S. Steel claimed the releases were federally permitted under CERCLA because the emissions were “governed by” its CAA Title V permits.\textsuperscript{36}

The district court granted U.S. Steel’s motion to dismiss, holding that under CERCLA “the emissions were ‘federally permitted

\textsuperscript{26. Id. (introducing where coke-oven gas is produced in steel making process).}
\textsuperscript{27. Id. (describing how coke-oven gas can pollute atmosphere).}
\textsuperscript{28. See Clean Air Council, 4 F.4th at 207 (addressing process Mon Valley Works uses to prevent coke-oven gas pollutants from entering atmosphere); see also U.S. Steel, Mon Valley Works Clairton Plant Operations and Environmental Report 16 (2019), https://www.ussteel.com/documents/40705/71641/U.+S.+Steel+Clairton+Plant+2019+Report.pdf (detailing Clairton Plant’s emissions control process). The Clairton Plant “operates a state-of-the-art by-products plant that recovers tar, ammonia, light oil (benzene, toluene, and xylene), and elemental sulfur from the coke oven gas . . . .” Id. (outlining by-products removed from coke-oven gas).}
\textsuperscript{29. Clean Air Council, 4 F.4th at 207 (stating why control rooms at Mon Valley Works were offline and inoperable for months).}
\textsuperscript{30. Id. (referencing how coke-oven gas pollutants were emitted at Mon Valley Works).}
\textsuperscript{31. Id. (describing pollution from burning un-cleaned coke-oven gas).}
\textsuperscript{32. Id. (outlining U.S. Steel’s compliance with its SIP CAA reporting obligations).}
\textsuperscript{33. See id. at 206 (noting CAC filed suit against U.S. Steel).}
\textsuperscript{34. Clean Air Council, 4 F.4th at 208-09 (arguing U.S. Steel’s emissions did not qualify for CERCLA reporting exemption).}
\textsuperscript{35. Id. at 208 (declaring only emissions compliant with CAA permits and regulations are eligible for exemption).}
\textsuperscript{36. Id. at 209 (providing emissions “governed by” CAA permits are subject to reporting exemption).}
releases’ because they were governed by” the facility’s CAA permits.\textsuperscript{37} CAC appealed, and on June 21, 2021, the Third Circuit affirmed the district court’s ruling, utilizing the same CAA Title V permit and CERCLA reasoning as the district court.\textsuperscript{38} U.S. Steel, therefore, was exempt from reporting the pollution to the NRC.\textsuperscript{39}

In support of U.S. Steel’s position, the Chamber of Commerce of the United States of America, American Chemistry Council, National Mining Association, American Coke and Coal Chemicals Institute, and Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry appeared as amici.\textsuperscript{40} The amicus curiae brief argued the district court correctly held that CERCLA is clear because the “‘federally permitted release’ exception is ‘unambiguous and does not require that air emissions comply with a Clean Air Act permit in order to be exempt.’”\textsuperscript{41} The brief also stressed that imposing a federal reporting requirement is “unnecessarily duplicative” and poses unnecessary regulatory burdens.\textsuperscript{42}

III. AIR POLLUTION IS A BAD SOLUTION: A STATUTORY, ADMINISTRATIVE, AND JUDICIAL BACKDROP

A. Clean Air Act

In 1970, Congress enacted the CAA to address dense levels of smog plaguing cities and industrial centers around the U.S.\textsuperscript{43} The CAA implements four major regulatory components.\textsuperscript{44} First, it requires the EPA to establish NAAQS “for pollutants that are common in outdoor air, considered harmful to public health and the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Id. (describing district court’s holding and reasoning).
\item \textsuperscript{38} Id. at 206, 213 (noting appeal from district court and Third Circuit’s holding).
\item \textsuperscript{39} Clean Air Council, 4 F.4th at 206, 213 (highlighting reporting implications of court’s holding).
\item \textsuperscript{40} See generally Brief of Amici Curiae Chamber of Commerce of the United States of America, American Chemistry Council, National Mining Association, American Coke & Coal Chemicals Institute, and Pennsylvania Chamber of Business & Industry Supporting Appellee at 1, Clean Air Council v. U.S. Steel Corp., 4 F.4th 204 (3d Cir. 2021) (No. 20-2215) (supporting U.S. Steel’s position).
\item \textsuperscript{41} Id. at 3 (quoting Clean Air Council v. U.S. Steel Corp., No. 2:19-CV-1072, 2020 WL 2490023, at *4 (W.D. Pa. May 14, 2020)) (asserting CERCLA’s language clearly supports U.S. Steel’s argument that it meets federal reporting exemption).
\item \textsuperscript{42} See id. (contending pollution event reports to both local and federal authorities would be onerous).
\end{itemize}
environment, and that come from numerous and diverse sources.45 Next, the CAA establishes New Source Performance Standards (NSPS) that authorize the EPA to develop technology-based standards for certain classifications of sources.46 Third, the CAA implements National Emission Standards for Hazardous Pollutants (NESHAPs).47 Finally, the CAA requires states to develop SIPs, which are subject to approval by the EPA, to achieve NAAQS.48 In 1977, Congress revised the CAA to prevent air quality deterioration in areas attaining NAAQS.49 In 1990, Congress made additional revisions instituting new regulatory programs to control acid rain and issue stationary source operating permits.50

The EPA’s role in setting NAAQS is a foundational aspect of the CAA.51 The EPA sets air quality standards for six main pollutant categories known as “criteria pollutants”: particulate matter (also known as particle pollution), ozone, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, and lead.52 Additionally, the CAA contains specific provisions to address hazardous air pollutants (HAPs).53 These pollutants can cause cancer and birth defects in

48. For a discussion of SIPs and their objectives, see supra notes 5-7 and accompanying text.
49. See Evolution of the Clean Air Act, supra note 44 (summarizing 1977 CAA amendments).
50. Id. (describing 1990 CAA amendments).
52. See Clean Air Act Requirements and History, supra note 43 (listing six criteria pollutants).
53. Id. (describing other pollutants CAA provisions address).
addition to detrimental environmental impacts. The EPA also regulates benzene, a toxic pollutant found in coke-oven gas.

The CAA relies on a system of “cooperative federalism” to achieve NAAQS set by the EPA. This system requires states to submit comprehensive SIPs, subject to EPA approval. A SIP is “a collection of regulations and documents used by a state . . . or local air district to implement, maintain, and enforce . . . NAAQS, and to fulfill other requirements of the Clean Air Act.”

Pennsylvania implements the CAA through its approved SIP. The SIP primarily leaves the enforcement and standard-setting functions in Allegheny County to the ACHD. Accordingly, the ACHD adopted its own “emissions standards, monitoring standards, permitting programs, and reporting requirements,” known as Article XXI. Pennsylvania’s SIP implements these local regulations and gives them the effect of “binding federal law.” Article XXI also provides that the operator of an Allegheny-based source must notify the ACHD if the source emits air contaminants in violation of the Pennsylvania SIP. In this notification, the operator must detail: the equipment that broke down; the potential cause of the breakdown; the estimated length of time; the “specific material(s) which are being, or are likely to be, emitted . . . .”; the estimated


58. See Basic Information About Air Quality SIPs, supra note 5 (defining SIPs).


60. See Clean Air Council, 4 F.4th at 208 (noting ACHD’s role in implementing Pennsylvania SIP).

61. See id. (discussing ACHD’s role in setting local air pollution standards); see also EPA Approved Regulations in the Pennsylvania SIP, supra note 59 (specifying EPA-approved Article XXI regulations).

62. See Clean Air Council, 4 F.4th at 208 (stating ACHD regulations are given effect of federal law under CAA); 40 C.F.R. § 52.2020(c)(2) (2022) (providing regulation implementing ACHD Art. XXI).

63. See ACHD Art. XXI § 2108.01(c)(1) (detailing reporting requirements for events resulting in high likelihood of emitting air contaminants).
quantity of materials; and the “[m]easures . . . taken or to be taken to minimize the length of the breakdown, the amount of air contaminants emitted, or the ambient effects of the emissions . . . .”

The CAA also requires that all major sources receive Title V operating permits. State and local agencies typically issue Title V permits, which are also called “Clean Air Act part 70” permits. These permits are comprehensive and consolidate all the source’s requirements under its respective SIP. They must also include “enforceable emission limitations and standards” and provide “inspection, entry, monitoring, compliance certification, and reporting requirements . . . .”

B. Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA)

Congress enacted CERCLA, commonly known as “Superfund,” on December 11, 1980. CERCLA provides a response program for remediation of abandoned, contaminated sites. More specifically, “CERCLA provides a Federal ‘Superfund’ to clean up uncontrolled or abandoned hazardous-waste sites as well as accidents, spills, and other emergency releases of pollutants and contaminants into the environment.”

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64. ACHD Art. XXI § 2108.01(c)(2)(A)-(F) (summarizing specific disclosure requirements).
65. 42 U.S.C. § 7661a(a) (requiring major sources have operating permits); see also Basic Information About Operating Permits, U.S. ENV’T PROT. AGENCY, https://www.epa.gov/title-v-operating-permits/basic-information-about-operating-permits (Feb. 11, 2022) (summarizing important aspects of Title V operating permits).
66. Basic Information About Operating Permits, supra note 65 (noting issuer of operating permits).
67. See § 7661c(a) (explaining Title V permits in greater detail).
68. See § 7661c(a),(c) (providing contents of Title V operating permits).
70. See CERCLA: Overview, supra note 69 (discussing primary goals of CERCLA).
These remediation efforts are made possible by a congressionally appropriated Superfund that acts as a trust.72 In the Superfund’s first five years, Congress raised over $1.6 billion from taxes on the chemical and petroleum industries.73 Funding rose to $8.5 billion in 1986 after Congress amended CERCLA with the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act (SARA).74 These amendments provide “site specific amendments, definitions clarifications, and technical requirements . . . including additional enforcement authorities.”75

Another goal of CERCLA is to impose Superfund liability on parties responsible for hazardous releases at contaminated sites.76 This liability is retroactive, joint and several, and strict.77 Liability is retroactive in that a party can be held liable for its involvement in polluting a site before CERCLA’s 1980 enactment.78 Additionally, liability is joint and several, meaning any “one potentially responsible party (PRP)” can be held liable for the entire cost of the cleanup.79 Finally, liability is strict in that it holds a party responsible if it contributed in any way to hazardous waste at a site.80

In addition to the reporting requirements under the CAA, CERCLA mandates federal reporting in certain circumstances.81 If a facility releases more than a set threshold of pollutants, CERCLA requires the facility operator to “immediately notify the National Response Center,” a division of the U.S. Coast Guard.82 Not all releases, however, require such notification.83 In relevant part, Congress exempts facilities from reporting any “federally permitted

73. See id. (describing primary source of Superfund’s initial funding).
75. See Summary of CERCLA, supra note 71 (explaining purpose of SARA).
77. Id. (analyzing extent and characteristics of CERCLA liability).
78. Id. (defining retroactive nature of CERCLA liability).
79. Id. (discussing CERCLA joint and several liability).
80. See id. (explaining CERCLA strict liability).
81. 42 U.S.C. § 9603(a) (providing reporting requirements when releasing prohibited amounts of hazardous substances).
82. Id. (outlining reporting requirements).
83. See § 9603(f) (detailing reporting exemptions built into statute).
release.” This exemption includes air emissions subject to a permit or regulation under the CAA or state plans implementing the CAA. Failure to comply with CERCLA’s reporting requirements may result in a penalty in excess of fifty-five thousand dollars per day depending on the date of assessment.

C. Administrative Guidance

A 1992 EPA administrative decision, In re Mobil Corp., provides administrative guidance on the “subject to” language in CERCLA’s “federally permitted release” exemption. In 1991, the Regional Administrator of the EPA issued three complaints against Mobil Oil Corporation (Mobil). The complaints stated that Mobil failed to comply with CERCLA’s reporting requirements after three air releases of hazardous substances occurred at one of its facilities.

Mobil argued that because it had a CAA permit, it qualified for CERCLA’s “federally permitted release” exemption. Mobil claimed, therefore, it was not subject to CERCLA’s federal reporting requirements. The EPA, however, found CERCLA’s “subject to” language in the “federally permitted release” exemption to be “inherently ambiguous” and ruled the exemption precluded emissions that violate CAA permits.

D. Statutory Interpretation Framework

In dealing with questions of statutory interpretation, courts first construe the plain meaning of the provision’s words at the time

84. § 9603(a) (stating federally permitted releases are exempt from reporting).
86. See 42 U.S.C. § 9609(b)(1) (outlining penalty for failure to comply with reporting requirements); see also Civil Monetary Penalty Inflation Adjustment Rule, 84 Fed. Reg. 2,056, 2,059 (Feb. 6, 2019) (detailing inflation-adjusted CERCLA civil monetary penalties).
87. 1992 EPA ALJ WL 293133, at *8–10 (providing guidance on similar CERCLA provision at issue in Clean Air Council).
88. See id. (discussing CERCLA reporting exemption).
89. Id. at *1 (describing administrative actions against Mobil).
90. Id. (stating basis for initial EPA complaints against Mobil).
91. Id. at *6 (outlining Mobil’s argument that exception is not limited to CAA permit-compliant emissions).
93. Id. at *8, *17 (noting EPA’s administrative holding that only CAA permit-compliant emissions qualify for “federally permitted release” exemption).
of the statute’s enactment. If the language of the provision is
clear and unambiguous, the court’s analysis generally stops there. When the plain meaning of the text is ambiguous, however, courts
interpret the provision’s meaning within its broader statutory con-
text. If the ambiguity is resolved under the plain meaning or
broader statutory context methods, the inquiry ends without the
need to pursue a legislative history analysis. When a court re-
solves ambiguity, deference should not be granted to a prior admin-
istrative branch decision.

1. Statutory Context

In Russello v. United States, the United States Supreme Court
interpreted a provision based on its broader statutory context. In 1977, a grand jury indicted petitioner Joseph Russello for racke-
teering, conspiracy, and mail fraud in violation of the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) chapter of the Or-
ganized Crime and Control Act of 1970. The district court en-
tered a judgment against Russello, ordering him to forfeit the
proceeds of his illicit acts under 18 U.S.C. § 1963(a)(1). The
RICO provision maintains that a person convicted under RICO
shall forfeit to the government “any interest . . . acquired or main-
tained in violation of section 1962.” The issue then turned to
whether profits and proceeds derived from illicit racketeering con-
stitute an “interest” under § 1963(a)(1).

www.law.cornell.edu/wex/statutory_construction (last visited May 10, 2022) (dis-
cussing plain language analysis as starting point in statutory construction).
95. See Steven Wisotsky, How to Interpret Statutes - Or Not: Plain Meaning and
Other Phantoms, 10 J. APP. PRAC. & PROCESS 321, 325 (2009) (articulating how plain
meaning of words in statutes generally controls).
provision in its greater statutory context to eliminate ambiguity).
(establishing legislative history should not complicate judicial analysis when plain
meaning and statutory context eliminate ambiguity).
partial holding regarding judicial deference to administrative decisions).
99. 464 U.S. 16, 23 (1983) (discussing Supreme Court’s holding that statutory
context eliminated ambiguity surrounding provision at issue in case).
100. Id. (referencing basis of Supreme Court’s opinion).
101. Id. at 17 (noting indictments).
102. Id. at 18 (addressing district court’s holding ordering Russello to turn
over illegal money).
103. 18 U.S.C. § 1963(a)(1) (outlining RICO’s statutory provision requiring
forfeiture of illegally obtained funds).
104. See Russello, 464 U.S. at 17 (summarizing foundational issue in case).
Russello argued § 1963(a)(1) only covered interests “in an enterprise” and “not profits and proceeds.” As such, he proposed that some of his money was exempt from forfeiture. In its analysis, the Supreme Court read § 1963(a)(1) within the full context of RICO. The Supreme Court averred that if Congress meant to restrict § 1963(a)(1) to only “interests in an enterprise,” Congress would have done so as it did in the following subsection. The Court, therefore, concluded that when Congress includes or excludes specific language in one part of a statute and not in another, it is presumed that Congress acted intentionally.

2. Legislative History

Courts have established that statutory interpretation should not consider legislative history when reading a provision in its statutory context or when analyzing its plain meaning provides a clear answer. In *Food Marketing Institute v. Argus Leader Media*, a South Dakota newspaper filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for data held by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) regarding the annual Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) redemption data from 2005 to 2010. The USDA did not disclose all the information, only granting a partial request to the newspaper. The newspaper subsequently sued the USDA for a more comprehensive data release.

The issue in *Food Marketing Institute* dealt with whether FOIA’s Exemption 4, which protects “trade secrets and commercial or financial information obtained from a person [that is] privileged or confidential,” applied to the SNAP data withheld by the USDA. The Supreme Court ultimately classified the information as “confidential” under Exemption 4. The Court found that the data fit

105. *Id.* at 20 (providing Russello’s argument).
106. See *id.* (discussing Russello’s defense against RICO forfeiture provision).
107. See *id.* at 25 (explaining Court interpreted § 1963(a)(1) in context of other RICO provisions).
108. *Id.* (stating evaluation of full statutory context eliminated ambiguity).
109. See Russello, 464 U.S. at 23 (referencing Court’s holding).
111. 139 S. Ct. 2356, 2361 (2019) (discussing plaintiff’s data request denied by USDA).
112. *Id.* (outlining facts of lawsuit).
113. *Id.* (reiterating USDA’s denial of SNAP data to plaintiff).
114. *Id.* (describing basis of lawsuit).
115. *Id.* (stating predominant issue in case regarding Exemption 4 as applied to SNAP data).
within the plain meaning of the word “confidential” at the time of FOIA’s enactment. Although legislative history supported an interpretation of “confidential” beyond its plain meaning, the Supreme Court asserted that legislative history can never “muddy” the meaning of “clear statutory text.”

3. Administrative Deference

When a court’s application of “traditional tools of statutory construction” resolves statutory ambiguity, deference to administrative guidance should not factor into the court’s analysis. In Epic Systems Corp. v. Lewis, the Supreme Court resolved three substantively similar cases. The Supreme Court specifically referenced the facts of Morris v. Ernst & Young, LLP, in which an accountant entered into an employment agreement with Ernst & Young requiring arbitration for all employment-related disputes. The accountant later filed suit against the firm alleging wage violations under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and sought to litigate under the FLSA’s collective action provision. The Supreme Court granted certiorari and reviewed whether the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and Arbitration Act (AA) prohibited enforcement of the employment contract’s arbitration agreement.

The employee-plaintiffs supported their argument by referencing administrative agency interpretations of the NLRA and AA favorable to their cause. In holding that the arbitration agreements must be enforced, the Supreme Court stated that “deference

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117. Id. at 2363 (finding “confidential” meant “private” or “secret” at time of FOIA’s enactment and SNAP data fell within definition).

118. Id. at 2364 (explaining legislative history serves no purpose in resolving unambiguous statutory text).


120. 138 S. Ct. at 1619 (2018) (detailing case in which Supreme Court did not defer to administrative guidance).

121. Id. (noting opinion resolved three separate cases).

122. 834 F.3d 975, 979-80 (9th Cir. 2016) (explaining one case for review before Supreme Court in Epic Systems Corp., rev’d sub nom., Epic Sys. Corp. v. Lewis, 138 S. Ct. 1612, 1632 (2018), and vacated, 894 F.3d 1093 (mem.) (9th Cir. 2018).


124. Id. at 1620 (describing basis of lawsuit).

125. Id. at 1620-21 (discussing relationship between AA and NLRA and resulting effect on enforcement of arbitration agreements at issue in case).

126. See id. at 1629 (noting employee’s request to defer to 2012 National Labor Relations Board opinion suggesting NLRA supersedes AA).
is not due unless a ‘court, employing traditional tools of statutory construction,’ is left with an unresolved ambiguity.” 127 The Court found no unresolved ambiguity, stating that “[w]here, as here, the canons supply an answer, ‘Chevron leaves the stage.’” 128

IV. Up in the Air No More: The Third Circuit’s Analysis

In Clean Air Council, the Third Circuit predominantly focused on the meaning of “subject to” in the context of CERCLA’s “federally permitted release” exemption in 42 U.S.C. § 9601(10)(H). 129 The court first established that the phrase “subject to” has only two possible interpretations: “governed or affected by” as U.S. Steel argued, or “obedient to” or “in compliance with” as CAC argued. 130 Given CERCLA’s entire context, the court concluded Congress only intended the phrase to mean “governed or affected by.” 131

The Third Circuit first acknowledged that according to Black’s Law Dictionary, “subject to” could mean either “governed or affected by” or “obedient to.” 132 Given this plain language ambiguity, the court proceeded to read the “federally permitted release” exemption in CERCLA’s broader statutory context. 133 The court explained that in other sections of § 9601, Congress explicitly used the language “in compliance with” a permit when discussing pretreatment standards or injection control programs. 134 Congress did not, however, choose to use that specific language in

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127. Id. at 1630 (quoting Chevron, U.S.A., Inc. v. Nat. Res. Def. Council, 467 U.S. 837, 843 n.9 (1984)) (stating circumstances under which deference to administrative agency decision is appropriate).


130. See id. at 209 (describing two dueling interpretations of § 9601(10)(H)’s “subject to” language).

131. Id. (concluding Congress meant “subject to” to mean “governed or affected by” based on contextual analysis).

132. Id. (finding Black’s Law Dictionary supported both CAC’s and U.S. Steel’s interpretations of phrase “subject to”).

133. See id. (describing next step in court’s reasoning after plain language analysis left unresolved ambiguity).

134. See 42 U.S.C. §§ 9601(10)(F),(J) (referencing definition of “federally permitted release” and its mention of provisions requiring compliance with permits or standards); see also Clean Air Council, 4 F.4th at 209 (arguing Congress purposefully specified compliance with certain permits or regulations in other sections of CERCLA).
§ 9601(10)(H) when discussing CERCLA’s “federally permitted release” exemption.135

To bolster its reasoning, the Third Circuit cited the Supreme Court’s holding in Russello.136 In relevant part, the opinion provided that the court presumes Congress acts intentionally when it includes specific language in one section of a law but not in another section of the same law.137 If Congress meant to condition the reporting exemption on compliance with a CAA Title V permit, it would have done so as it did in other sections of CERCLA.138

The court further supported its contextual argument by citing specific CERCLA provisions differentiating the phrase “subject to” from “in compliance with.”139 For example, the court referenced 42 U.S.C. § 9620(a)(1), stating “each department, agency, and instrumentality of the United States . . . shall be subject to, and comply with, this chapter.”140 If Congress intended “subject to” to mean the same as “comply with,” the two phrases would be redundant in that provision.141

Proceeding from its statutory interpretation analysis, the court determined that reading “subject to” as “governed or affected by” is logical within CERCLA’s greater framework.142 The Third Circuit held that “reading ‘subject to’ as ‘governed or affected by’ makes sense,” as it supports CERCLA’s “cooperative federalism” scheme.143 The court concluded that reporting to both state and federal authorities would be duplicative and run antithetical to

135. See Clean Air Council, 4 F.4th at 209 (drawing distinction between language of § 9601(10)(H) and other CERCLA provisions).
136. Id. (citing Russello v. United States, 464 U.S. 16, 23 (1983)) (relying on Russello to support argument that Congress excluded phrase “in compliance with” purposefully from § 9601(10)(H)).
137. Id. (citing Russello v. United States, 464 U.S. 16, 23 (1983)) (supporting contention that Congress purposefully excluded language specifying compliance with CAA permit from § 9601(10)(H)).
138. Id. (asserting Congress purposefully included and excluded language in CERCLA).
139. Id. (emphasizing Congress did not intend for “subject to” to mean “in compliance with,” as CAC argued).
140. Clean Air Council, 4 F.4th at 209 (providing example of CERCLA provision that differentiates “subject to” phrase from language mentioning compliance with permits or regulations).
141. Id. (illustrating Congress’s purpose for including and excluding certain language).
142. See id. at 210 (suggesting “governed or affected by” interpretation fits within CERCLA’s context).
143. Id. (concluding Third Circuit’s interpretation of “subject to” fits CERCLA’s theme of “cooperative federalism”).
CERCLA’s foundational principle of “cooperative federalism,” which produces implementation autonomy.\(^{144}\)

The court continued its analysis by addressing both the CAC’s citation to a Senate committee report and a Senate committee chairman’s comments suggesting pollution accidents should be federally reportable under CERCLA.\(^{145}\) The Third Circuit stated the report did not specifically discuss the interpretation of “subject to” within CERCLA’s context.\(^{146}\) Even if it did, the court relied on the proposition in *Food Marketing Institute* that legislative history should not obscure clear statutory text.\(^{147}\) After finding the statutory text to be clear, the Third Circuit did not give weight to CERCLA’s legislative history.\(^{148}\)

The court also directly addressed CAC’s citation to the EPA administrative decision *In re Mobil Corp.*, which held that the CERCLA phrase “subject to” was ambiguous and read it to exclude emissions that violate CAA permits.\(^{149}\) Citing this opinion, CAC asked the court to grant deference to its holding.\(^{150}\) Although the decision in *In re Mobil Corp.* favors CAC’s argument, the Third Circuit concluded it should not be afforded deference.\(^{151}\) In making this decision, the Third Circuit adhered to Supreme Court precedent supporting not deferring to an administrative decision when “traditional tools of statutory construction” resolve statutory ambiguity.\(^{152}\) Given that CERCLA’s context resolved the meaning of “subject to,” there was no ambiguity for the EPA to settle.\(^{153}\)

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144. See id. at 207 (noting additional connection between Third Circuit’s decision and its alignment with CERCLA’s “cooperative federalism” structure).

145. *Clean Air Council*, 4 F.4th at 210 (addressing CAC’s argument favoring legislative history).

146. Id. (describing Senate materials cited by CAC and their irrelevance to contested issue).

147. Id. (citing *Food Mktg. Inst. v. Argus Leader Media*, 139 S. Ct. 2356, 2364 (2019)) (discussing precedent that legislative history should not obscure clear meaning of statutory text).

148. See id. (dismissing need for legislative history analysis).

149. See *In re Mobil Corp.*, 1992 EPA ALJ WL 293133, at *8 (noting conclusion of EPA’s decision).

150. *Clean Air Council*, 4 F.4th at 210 (outlining CAC’s request that Third Circuit defer to 1992 EPA administrative decision).

151. Id. at 210-11 (stating administrative deference is unapplicable in this case).

152. Id. at 211 (quoting *Chevron, U.S.A., Inc. v. Nat’l Res. Def. Counsel*, 467 U.S. 837, 843 n.9 (1984)) (noting court’s reliance on principles discussed in *Chevron* to support assertion that administrative deference comes into play with unresolved statutory ambiguity).

153. Id. (rejecting need for administrative deference).
In its conclusion, the Third Circuit addressed CAC’s argument that the district court was wrong to grant U.S. Steel’s motion to dismiss because it was an affirmative defense to contend that hydrogen sulfide, benzene, and coke-oven emissions were federally permitted releases.\footnote{154. \textit{Id.} (addressing whether U.S. Steel’s affirmative defense barred district court from granting motion to dismiss).} In response, the Third Circuit stated courts sometimes consider affirmative defenses on a motion to dismiss and may dismiss a complaint when “an unanswered affirmative defense appears on its face.”\footnote{155. \textit{Clean Air Council}, 4 F.4th at 211 (outlining grounds for affirming motion to dismiss).} The federally permitted release exemption applied on the face of the complaint, showing U.S. Steel’s emissions were subject to its Title V CAA permits and ultimately exempt from federal reporting.\footnote{156. \textit{Id.} (finding U.S. Steel’s CAA Title V permits cover hydrogen sulfide, benzene, and coke-oven gas).}

\textbf{V. A Breath of Fresh Air, but Maybe a Step in the Wrong Direction: A Critical Analysis of the Third Circuit’s Opinion in \textit{Clean Air Council}}

The Third Circuit applied traditional rules of statutory interpretation to arrive at a pointed conclusion.\footnote{157. For a discussion of the Third Circuit’s step-by-step analysis, see \textit{supra} notes 129-56 and accompanying text.} According to the Third Circuit: “[w]hen Congress writes, context matters,” and context also clarifies.\footnote{158. \textit{Clean Air Council}, 4 F.4th at 206 (outlining foundation of Third Circuit’s reasoning that statutory context matters).} Relying on Supreme Court precedent, the Third Circuit established clear and concise reasons why the contextual language of CERCLA cleared up any ambiguity surrounding the meaning of “subject to” in § 9601(10)(H).\footnote{159. For a discussion of the Third Circuit’s reasoning, see \textit{supra} notes 129-56 and accompanying text.} By resolving the issue on contextual grounds and avoiding a murky legislative history analysis, the court arrived at the proper legal outcome.\footnote{160. \textit{Clean Air Council}, 4 F.4th at 206 (suggesting court’s analysis provided clear and structured reasoning without diving into convoluted inquiry).}

Despite the court’s intuitive statutory interpretation analysis, the opinion was perhaps misguided on some important aspects.\footnote{161. For a discussion on shortcomings in the Third Circuit’s reasoning, see \textit{infra} notes 162-82 and accompanying text.} Specifically, the court mischaracterized the notion that reporting to the NRC is duplicative and threatens CERCLA’s “cooperative feder-
Such an assertion implies that by reporting to the NRC, federal intervention will threaten the local response authority granted to the ACHD under CERCLA and Pennsylvania’s SIP. Additionally, this reasoning suggests the Third Circuit perceived the reporting requirement as jeopardizing the spirit of “cooperative federalism” inherent in CERCLA.

This reasoning does not align with federal response functions in the aftermath of air pollution events. The NRC website states it is not a response agency. Instead, it primarily serves as an emergency call center resource. Emergency call centers field initial reports of pollution events and forward the information to requisite state and local authorities for proper response action. The NRC does not assume response efforts or relieve local regulators of their duties. Instead, the NRC supports state and local authorities by forwarding information to assist them.

Although the NRC does not handle response efforts itself, reports to the NRC activate a National Contingency Plan and federal government response capabilities. The federal government’s response effort, however, is generally to “promote coordination among the hierarchy of responders and contingency plans.”

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162. For a discussion of federal response functions after pollution events and legitimate public purposes served by CERCLA reporting, see infra notes 165-82 and accompanying text.

163. For a discussion of the Third Circuit’s analysis, see supra notes 129-56 and accompanying text.

164. For a discussion of the Third Circuit’s determination that its holding fits within CERCLA’s “cooperative federalism” scheme, see supra notes 142-44 and accompanying text.

165. For a discussion on shortcomings in the Third Circuit’s reasoning and functions of federal authorities responding to pollution events, see infra notes 165-82 and accompanying text.


167. Id. (establishing NRC primary function as call center).

168. Id. (reiterating call center and information distributing functions of NRC).

169. See id. (demonstrating absence of information on NRC website suggests it does not assume response effort responsibilities).

170. See id. (highlighting true function of NRC).


on-scene coordinator in the impacted region integrates the local on-site authorities with the potentially responsible party to determine the appropriate response plan. Federal assistance may not be required if state and local government agencies have the proper resources to handle the pollution event. Given federal response efforts focus on promoting coordination with local authorities and providing support where needed, the Third Circuit’s suggestion that NRC reporting threatens “cooperative federalism” is overstated.

Additionally, the Third Circuit’s conclusion that CERCLA reporting would be duplicative and serve no public purpose misses the mark. It is true that reporting similar pollution information to local Allegheny County authorities and the NRC may be repetitive on its face. This conclusion, however, overlooks the fact that dual reporting can theoretically serve a legitimate public purpose. Requiring potential polluters to face the additional hurdles of dual reporting and corresponding financial repercussions for non-compliance contribute to an overall stricter regulatory environment for polluters. Most Americans support stricter environmental laws and regulations, and research suggests a tighter regulatory environment results in fewer domestic carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. The Third Circuit’s assertion, therefore, fails


174. See id. (noting federal assistance may not be required in some instances).

175. For a discussion of federal response functions following hazardous pollution events, see supra notes 165-75. For a discussion of Clean Air Council, see supra notes 129-56 and accompanying text.

176. For a discussion on shortcomings in the Third Circuit’s reasoning about NRC reporting serving no public purpose, see infra notes 176-82 and accompanying text.

177. For a discussion of the Third Circuit’s analysis, see supra notes 129-56 and accompanying text.

178. For a discussion of the purpose of NRC reporting, see supra notes 171-75 and accompanying text.

179. For a discussion on CERCLA’s reporting requirements, see supra notes 81-86 and accompanying text.

to recognize the positive domestic environmental effects that an additional reporting requirement on sources may have. As sources face greater accountability for their actions, extra reporting may likely incentivize them to take greater precautionary measures in the future.

VI. LOWERING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR POLLUTERS: POTENTIAL IMPACT OF CLEAN AIR COUNCIL

The Third Circuit’s decision represents a significant victory for U.S. Steel and other potential polluters within the jurisdiction. The opinion clarifies CERCLA’s federal reporting exemption as applying solely to air emissions governed by a Title V CAA permit. Only unregulated air emission releases not governed by CAA permits are subject to the NRC reporting requirements and subsequent non-compliance fines. In practical effect, Clean Air Council provides clearer pollution reporting obligations for all sources.

The most significant impact of the Third Circuit’s decision, however, is that sources governed by CAA permits may now avoid potentially serious financial penalties for non-compliance with CERCLA’s NRC reporting requirements. CERCLA levies fines in excess of fifty-five thousand dollars per day against any source that fails to comply with its requirements.

abroad in countries with less stringent environmental obligations. Ben-David et al., supra (describing tradeoff of tighter domestic environmental regulations).

181. See Ben-David et al., supra note 180 (noting tighter environmental regulations produce positive domestic environmental effects).


183. For a discussion of the Third Circuit’s step-by-step analysis, see supra notes 129-56 and accompanying text.

184. For a discussion of how the Third Circuit’s holding clarifies the CERCLA reporting exemption, see supra notes 157-60 and accompanying text.

185. For a discussion of Clean Air Council’s implications regarding who the reporting requirements apply to, see supra notes 129-56 and accompanying text.

186. For a discussion of how Clean Air Council clarifies reporting requirements, see supra notes 157-60 and accompanying text.

187. For a discussion of CERCLA penalties, see supra notes 69-86 and accompanying text.

188. For a discussion of CERCLA’s NRC reporting requirements and related financial penalties for non-compliance, see supra notes 81-86 and accompanying text.
Circuit’s decision, polluting sources can avoid this additional layer of CERCLA reporting and corresponding financial penalties. 189

Clean Air Council serves to lower accountability for sources that cause pollution events in violation of the CAA. 190 By eliminating added potential financial penalties and reporting requirements, it is less costly for polluters such as U.S. Steel to continue polluting. 191 Even in the event of hazardous air pollutant emissions, the Third Circuit’s decision eliminates a form of potential liability for sources. 192

Allegheny County ranks among the worst in the nation on various air quality metrics. 193 Specifically, the Liberty-Clairton non-attainment area, which is inside the greater Pittsburgh non-attainment area, contains high levels of particulate matter pollution. 194 U.S. Steel’s Clairton Coke Works plant produces a majority of that area’s pollution. 195 Research has also shown that cancer

189. For a discussion of how this decision allows CAA permit-governed sources to avoid CERCLA reporting penalties, see supra notes 187-89 and accompanying text.
190. For a discussion of the decision’s impact on reducing reporting obligations and eliminating associated non-compliance penalties, see supra notes 183-89 and accompanying text.
191. For a discussion of Clean Air Council’s favorable cost implications for U.S. Steel and other sources, see supra notes 183-89 and accompanying text.
192. For a discussion of Clean Air Council’s elimination of CERCLA reporting liability for CAA permit-governed sources, see supra notes 183-89 and accompanying text.
195. See Reilly, supra note 194, at iv (establishing link between U.S. Steel and high levels of particulate matter surrounding Clairton Coke plant).
risks are higher for residents living in the Liberty-Clairton area encompassing U.S. Steel’s Clairton Coke Works.196

Ultimately, stricter air control requirements in Allegheny County may be needed to solve the pressing air quality issue, but the Third Circuit’s decision in favor of U.S. Steel cuts back on reporting obligations for polluters.197 Greater reporting requirements and exposure to additional financial penalties can set a strong precedent for holding sources accountable for causing hazardous pollution events and associated adverse public health effects.198 Stricter requirements are necessary to prevent sources, such as U.S. Steel’s Clairton Coke Works, from vastly contributing to air pollution and causing harmful public health implications in surrounding areas.199

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196. See id. at 35 (finding health-outcome risk for cancer is significantly higher for residents of Liberty-Clairton area than other parts of Allegheny County); see also Kristina Marusic, Western Pennsylvania Environmental Groups Seek More Monitoring of Cancer-Causing Benzene, ENV’T HEALTH NEWS (Apr. 14, 2020), https://www.ehn.org/western-pennsylvania-air-pollution-2645706992/particle-2 (describing air pollution from U.S. Steel putting residents at greater risk of cancer and discussing Allegheny County’s poor air quality and resulting greater cancer risks); see also Debra Smit, Future Needs Clean Air, Healthy Communities, PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE (May 27, 2021, 12:00 AM), https://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/2021/05/27/Future-needs-clean-air-healthy-communities/stories/202105270023 (stating Allegheny County ranks in top one percent nationally of counties for cancer risk from air pollution); see also Allegheny County’s Air Monitors Comply with Federal Standards for the First Time. What Does This Mean for the Air We Breathe?, NEXT PITTSBURGH (Feb. 5, 2021), https://nextpittsburgh.com/features/allegheny-countys-air-monitors-comply-with-federal-standards-for-the-first-time-what-does-this-mean-for-the-air-we-breathe/ (referencing 2018 study ranking Allegheny County as one of top counties with highest risk of cancer from air pollution).

197. For a discussion of the pressing air quality issue in Allegheny County, see supra notes 193-96 and accompanying text. For a discussion of less strict compliance obligations and lessened accountability for polluters resulting from this decision, see supra notes 183-92 and accompanying text.

198. For a discussion of less strict compliance obligations and lessened accountability for polluters resulting from this decision, see supra notes 183-92 and accompanying text.

199. For a discussion of how the Third Circuit’s decision may not set a strong enough precedent to adequately deal with pressing air quality issues in Allegheny County, see supra notes 183-92 and accompanying text.

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