

A Look at Pollution Lawsuits Around Raritan Bay (4-29-26)

Over the past several weeks, I've been digging deeply into the history of pollution along Raritan Bay and the waterways that feed it, and one of the most common questions I've been asked is simple: "What lawsuits have there been?"

Most people assume there must have been one big case that explained everything or fixed everything. There wasn't. What I've found instead is a long, layered legal history—stretching back decades—made up of lawsuits, enforcement actions, settlements, and ongoing cleanup obligations. When you look at them together, they tell a much more complete story about how pollution developed here and why it has been so difficult to resolve.

There is no master list of lawsuits tied to pollution around the bay. Instead, there are dozens of overlapping cases involving federal agencies, the State of New Jersey, private companies, and environmental groups.

Some were lawsuits. Some were enforcement actions. Some were negotiated settlements. Together, they reveal something important: This wasn't one mistake. It was a system.

Raritan Bay Slag Case (1960s–Present)

One of the most visible and significant cases is the contamination along the shoreline in Laurence Harbor and nearby Sayreville.

Between the late 1960s and early 1970s, industrial slag—waste material from metal smelting—was used to build seawalls, jetties, and shoreline structures. At the time, it was seen as practical and efficient. What wasn't addressed was that this material contained lead and other toxic metals.

By the 1980s and 1990s, contamination concerns led to state investigations. The site was later designated a federal Superfund site, triggering decades of legal action.

Key milestones include:

- Late 1960s–1970s: Slag used in shoreline construction
- 1980s–1990s: State investigations begin
- 2000s: Federal Superfund involvement expands
- 2014–2016: Major EPA removal of contaminated material
- 2021: EPA cleanup plan valued at approximately \$79 million
- 2025: Settlement and consent decree totaling roughly \$150 million

Status today: Cleanup is ongoing. Large amounts of contaminated material have been removed, but monitoring and remediation continue under federal oversight.

Raritan Baykeeper v. NL Industries (2009–2013)

Filed in 2009, this federal case focused on contamination from former National Lead operations in Sayreville. The key argument was that pollution was not just historical—it was still moving through groundwater and sediments into the Raritan River and into the bay. The case went through multiple legal stages and helped reinforce a critical point: Pollution does not stop when operations end.

Status today: Contamination in sediments and groundwater remains under long-term monitoring and remediation.

NJDEP Consent Orders (Late 1980s–Present)

Beginning in the late 1980s, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection issued legally binding administrative orders requiring companies like NL Industries to investigate and clean up contamination. These actions didn't always involve courtrooms, but they created long-term legal responsibility.

Status today: These obligations remain active and continue to guide cleanup efforts.

Superfund Sites in Middlesex County (1970s–Present)

Several major sites contributed to the legal landscape:

Atlantic Resources Corporation – Sayreville

Industrial metal recovery operations led to soil and groundwater contamination.

- EPA Superfund site
- Ongoing remediation

Horseshoe Road Complex – Sayreville

Drums, solvents, and hazardous waste buried near the river.

- Federal investigation and cleanup
- Long-term monitoring

Global Landfill – Old Bridge

Operated from approximately 1968–1984, accepting municipal and industrial waste.

- Superfund designation
- Capped, with groundwater monitoring

Kin-Buc Landfill – Edison

One of New Jersey's most notorious hazardous waste landfills, including PCB contamination.

- Federal enforcement actions
- Capped, but still monitored

Status today: Most of these sites are closed but remain under long-term environmental oversight due to persistent contamination.

Upstream Industrial Liability (1930s–Present)

Not all pollution began at the bay. Facilities inland fed directly into the watershed:

Cornell-Dubilier Electronics – South Plainfield

1936–1962 manufacturing using PCBs

- Contamination spread to Bound Brook and downstream into the Raritan River
- Federal cleanup actions

American Cyanamid – Bridgewater

Nearly a century of chemical manufacturing

- Major soil and groundwater contamination
- Long-term remediation

Status today: Cleanup continues, and contaminants remain in sediments and groundwater.

Monmouth County Cases (1970s–Present)

Several important cases developed on the southern side of the bay:

Imperial Oil / Champion Chemicals – Marlboro

- Chemical contamination
- Superfund designation
- Ongoing cleanup

Bog Creek Farm – Howell

- Illegal dumping of paint and solvent waste in the early 1970s
- Groundwater contamination

White Swan Cleaners – Sea Girt

- Dry-cleaning solvent contamination
- State remediation programs

Status today: These sites remain under varying levels of cleanup and monitoring.

Middlesex Sampling Plant (1940s–Present)

Located in Middlesex Borough, this site handled radioactive materials connected to early U.S. atomic programs.

Contamination spread into nearby properties.

- Federal cleanup responsibility
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers involvement

Status today: Cleanup has taken decades and continues in phases.

Arthur Kill Industrial Cases

To fully understand the legal picture, you have to include the Arthur Kill.

For decades, this area was lined with refineries, chemical plants, and storage facilities.

Legal actions have included:

- oil spills
- chemical discharge cases

- wastewater violations

Status today: Heavily regulated, but still affected by legacy contamination.

Staten Island Dumping Era

Across the water, Staten Island played a major role.

Fresh Kills Landfill operated from 1948 to 2001 and was one of the largest landfills in the world.

Legal actions led to:

- closure
- environmental remediation
- long-term management

Status today: Closed, but still under environmental control.

Where Things Stand Today

Today, conditions are better than they were decades ago, largely due to environmental laws and enforcement. But the system is not fully restored.

- Contaminants remain in sediments
- Some groundwater systems are still affected
- Monitoring continues across multiple sites
- Fish advisories still exist in certain areas

The Raritan River and Raritan Bay are cleaner—but not clean.

Keyport and the Question Still Being Asked

One place that deserves special mention is Keyport, not because of a major lawsuit that defined everything, but because of the questions that are still being asked today. Unlike some of the larger cases in Sayreville or Old Bridge, Keyport does not have a single, widely documented lawsuit that explains its environmental history. Instead, what exists is a combination of historical industrial activity, landfill use, and growing community concern about what may have been left behind.

Sites such as the former Aeromarine property represent a pattern seen throughout the region. Industry operated, land was used, and in later years, that land was repurposed without always having a complete public record of what had been placed there.

What makes Keyport important in this discussion is not that it has a clear legal conclusion, but that it does not.

There are ongoing questions about:

- what materials may have been buried
- how contamination might move through soil and groundwater
- and what long-term impact, if any, that may have had

Status today: Unlike some federally designated Superfund sites, the situation in Keyport is still evolving. Investigations, discussions, and community awareness are increasing, but there is not yet a single defining legal case that answers all of the questions.

My Final Thought

What I expected to find was one big lawsuit that explained everything. What I found instead were dozens of cases, spread out over decades, each dealing with a piece of the problem. And when you put them all together, you begin to understand that this wasn't one bad actor or one bad decision. It was a system. And like everything else in this story, the consequences are still with us.

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