

# Case Study: Richmond Tells Coal Exporters to Kick Rocks

By Sarah Hamm



In a blazing two-part battle to clear coal pollution from their city, residents of Richmond, California came out triumphant.

Richmond is a small coastal city, with a population of about a hundred thousand, situated across the bay from San Francisco. Fog is at home here, as are bay seals and egrets, and monarch butterflies and Canada geese rest here on their long migrations. The [people](#) have a working class [history](#) with modern high-tech development.

Harbor Channel lines one edge of the town, where a rail line ends at Levin Terminal, one of only three working coal terminals on the West Coast. Coal and petcoke, a byproduct of oil refining, are transported by freight up from Utah and then shipped overseas.

Major health problems for the people in the area are created by the massive piles of dark, oily coal and petcoke that lay on the site. The wind carries particulate matter from the piles into the city, including neighborhoods and [elementary schools](#) less than a mile away from the terminal. Greasy coal dust sticks around, causing diseases like asthma, emphysema, and cancer.

When petroleum companies tripled their coal processing at the site in 2017, citizens [rose up in protest](#). Working class, service, and high-tech professionals alike came together in an upswell of grassroots activism to protect their town. People went door to door to raise awareness of the problem. They took health surveys, called officials, showed up at city council meetings and gathered thousands of signatures on a letter to the council. [Sunflower Alliance](#), an activist group against fossil fuels, helped organize a “No Coal in Richmond” protest with signs and printed shirts. The city could not ignore so much demand.

After nearly three years of citizen activism, the council passed a ban on coal exporting in Richmond, encompassing the Levin Terminal. The peoples’ campaign had worked: they had done it. The ban meant coal had to be phased out of the terminal by 2023, just three years’ time. Richmond, it seemed, would soon breathe easy. But, as it turned out, the fight was not over.

Fossil fuel companies operating at Levin along with the terminal itself sued the city for the right to continue exporting coal. Petroleum complained that the ban would force them to ship their product through Mexico or go bust. [Earthjustice](#), an environmental law advocacy group, stepped in to back the city in the lawsuit. The local chapter of the Sierra Club and [San Francisco Baykeeper](#), a pollution watchdog nonprofit, also offered support. The defense argued that the city was justified in enacting the ban, to protect the health and safety of its inhabitants.

In the end, coal could not overpower the city’s robust legal team and the parties [reached a settlement](#). In it, coal operators at Levin must shut down exports by 2026, giving them an additional three years to transition their business designs. In the meantime, they must take mitigation measures to reduce the volume of coal dust polluting the city’s air. Among these measures are dust blankets to cover the piles and wind screens to reduce the likelihood for the particulates to blow into town.

The success of Richmond’s fight against toxic coal pollution rested first on the dedicated voices of the people to publicize the problem and influence their lawmakers, and then on the competence and resolve of their legal team to uphold the city’s rights. They leveraged local activist and advocacy groups to help them protest and litigate. The people of Richmond are an example for other cities standing up against polluters.