

## 2nd suit targets PG&E

By Christine Hanley  
Associated Press

KETTLEMAN HILLS, Calif. — In the No. 1 hit "Erin Brockovich," many moviegoers are seeing how a brash young legal secretary forced Pacific Gas & Electric Co. to pay a record \$333 million settlement for poisoning the water in a small California desert town.

But the movie's story of environmental villainy is only the beginning of the legal and public relations nightmare Brockovich has created for the utility company.

A bigger, broader lawsuit is headed to trial in November against San Francisco-based PG&E and one of its main suppliers.

About 1,500 employees, their families, other residents and farmers who lived or worked near three PG&E gas-compressor plants contend their water supplies also were contaminated with harmful levels of cancer-causing chromium 6 from the 1950s to the 1970s.

The tough-talking, streetwise Brockovich is trying to find every last person who might have been exposed. Being portrayed on screen by Julia Roberts hasn't hurt. In the movie's first week, 40 to 50 potential plaintiffs called.

"We won't feel resolved — morally, ethically, or legally — until we have found everyone we were supposed to," said Brockovich, 39. "And I will keep working until we do."

PG&E has said little about the accuracy of the movie or its effect on the litigation.

"Our general response with respect to the movie is just that we recognize it's a dramatization. It's an entertainment vehicle," spokesman Greg Pruett said. He added that PG&E officials "don't really have any thoughts" about how the film might affect the company's image or influence jurors.

"I will say this: I do believe that when the case is brought to trial, we will mount a very spirited and vigorous defense," he said. "And we are confident we will be successful in that defense."

Brockovich, who was hired by lawyer Ed Masry even though she had no college degree or technical experience, was looking at files for a real estate case in 1992 when she found medical reports about low T-cell counts and other blood problems among residents of the town of Hinkley.

Curious, she drove her beat-up car out to the



Damian Dovarganes/Associated Press

Erin Brockovich of Agoura Hills says she's still going after PG&E in court.

Mojave Desert town — about 130 miles northeast of Los Angeles, near the Arizona state line — and began a quest that lasted four years.

"Erin did most of the work," Masry, played by Albert Finney in the movie, said of the research that uncovered the Hinkley pollution scandal that brought compensation for 652 Hinkley residents in 1996.

Brockovich earned \$2 million for herself. But she wasn't done snooping around.

Suspecting similar problems at other PG&E plants, Brockovich and Masry drove out to Kettleman Hills in California's Central Valley, where employees and their families once lived onsite in a complex they called

Camp PG&E.

Masry looked at the cooling towers and the buildings abandoned in the mid-1980s and saw no sign of contamination. He told Brockovich to drop it.

But she noticed a white powder on the needles of the tamarisk trees, an abnormality she remembered from Hinkley. And soon, she was at it again, mining records and tracking down anyone who lived or worked at Kettleman.

Among the boxloads of documents she copied was a 1964 letter from the U.S. Interior Department notifying PG&E about unhealthy levels of chromium 6 in Kettleman's water well.