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Defense suggests illnesses exaggerated

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THIBODAUX, La. (AP) - Are some residents of Grand Bois exaggerating their illnesses? A lawyer for the former operator of a Lafourche Parish oil field waste dump seems to be suggesting that.

Health complaints made by Grand Bois residents on a 1995 claim form differed from what they told a doctor in 1997, said attorney Walter Thompson, a defense lawyer for Campbell Wells Corp., the waste pit's former owners.

Thompson pointed out the differences Thursday as he questioned a Colorado physician, Dr. James Kornberg, hired by plaintiffs as an expert in a lawsuit filed by Grand Bois residents against Exxon Corp. and Campbell Wells.

Thompson said the oil field waste site next to the community of Grand Bois should be shut down to protect the public's health. He also characterized the dumping of 80 loads of oil field sludge Exxon shipped to the facility from Alabama in March 1994 as "a chemical spill."

The trial, in its third week, is the first in a series of trials in 301 lawsuits brought by Grand Bois residents against Campbell Wells and Exxon. At issue is whether waste transported to the waste pit made the residents sick. Eleven residents' cases are currently being tried.

The trial continued today in state district court, where Exxon and Campbell Wells attorneys may begin calling their witnesses.

During Thursday's cross-examination of Kornberg, Thompson noted that plaintiff Blake Matherne complained of a variety of symptoms when Kornberg examined him in 1997. But in a claim form filled out in 1995, Matherne's sole complaint was watery eyes. And he said the problem was resolved.

Similarly, another plaintiff complained in 1995 that he had vomited for 45 minutes and was ill for a week after the waste was dumped, a sharp difference with the more elaborate complaints of lasting illness made in 1997 to Kornberg.

Kornberg said he had not seen the '95 claim forms.

Earlier, Kornberg said he believes hazardous material is leaving the dump site and being ingested through the air by residents. The exposure to chemicals such as hydrogen sulfide, benzene and arsenic in oilfield waste could be compared to a chemical spill anywhere else, Kornberg said. He called it "pandemonium" that would require a thorough cleanup.

Residents are concerned about a future disease - namely cancer - and may need monitoring for the rest of their lives after being exposed to these wastes, he said.

If the site can't be sealed to prevent the exposure, or at least ceasing of activities it should be shut down, Kornberg concluded.

Also Thursday, the plaintiffs won another important, related ruling from the Louisiana Supreme Court.

In a reversal of the trial judge's ruling, Louisiana's 1st Circuit Court of Appeal said Wednesday that Grand Bois plaintiffs can seek future medical monitoring expenses for illnesses they may have suffered from an oil field waste site near their community. On Thursday, the Supreme Court agreed with the appeal court.

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