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Oil field waste worker says stink sickened him

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THIBODAUX, La. (AP) - Preparing oil field waste for shipment from Alabama to a disposal pit in south Louisiana was a sickening experience, McHenry Booker said.

Booker, 49, of Baton Rouge, said he worked at the Alabama site on March 14, 1994, and again on March 17-18. Part of his duties included lining the 22-foot boxes into which the waste was placed and transported, he said.

A physical examination showed he was healthy before the assignment, Booker testified Wednesday at the trial of a lawsuit brought by some Lafourche Parish residents against Exxon and Campbell Wells Corp., former operator of the waste dump in Grand Bois.

When he arrived in Alabama, Booker said, a strong chemical smell hit him.

"I never smelled anything like this before. It was a loud smell of gas. ... a mixture with all kinds of chemicals. It took my breath away," said Booker who has worked in the industry since the early 1970s.

He said he also "got real, real sick" and vomited a brown-black fluid that "tasted like the chemical smelled."

Other symptoms included dizziness, headaches and nausea.

On his return home, Booker said the normal four-hour drive took an extra three hours because he was sick and had to stop nine times.

"I had to stop and vomit all the way," he said.

Booker testified that he suffered headaches, dizziness, shortness of breath and nausea for about a month after leaving Alabama.

"The bad chemical taste in my mouth lasted about three months," he said.

Under cross-examination by Exxon attorney Louis Woolf, Booker acknowledged an April 1994 medical diagnosis of Hepatitis C, ulcer, elevated liver function, inflamed esophagus and pancreas.

Walter Thompson, an attorney for Campbell Wells, noted that Booker's doctor told him he contracted Hepatitis C through a virus.

Booker's testimony ended Wednesday's proceedings. The trial was to resume today.

In earlier testimony, an Exxon engineer testified that one reason the company decided to move 80 truckloads of oil field waste to Grand Bois was because Louisiana's regulations are some of the most stringent in the country.

It was the second day of questioning in court for Doug Callon. On Tuesday, he was questioned for more than five hours by Michael Fawer, an attorney representing the first 10 of more than 300 Grand Bois residents who are suing Exxon and Campbell Wells. There were more questions from Fawer on Wednesday, then cross-examination by Exxon's lawyer, Howard Jarvis.

Most of the residents of Grand Bois live within a half-mile of Campbell Wells' waste facility. They contend the waste has damaged their health, causing chronic headaches, nosebleeds, rashes and other ailments.

The residents are seeking an undisclosed amount of money to compensate them for those health problems and for past and future medical expenses, and for emotional distress.

Callon was part of the Exxon team that made the decision to ship the waste to Campbell Wells in March 1994.

In 1980, Congress granted petroleum exploration and production companies an exemption from the hazardous-waste disposal regulations that apply to most other industries. The exemption left the regulation of oil field waste to the states.

In Louisiana, where the petroleum industry employed 79,000 people last year, oil field waste has been defined as non-hazardous. There were no laws governing the disposal of such waste in Alabama at the time, Callon said.

But, in 1993, Alabama regulators told Exxon to shut down one of its oil field waste pits and that's when the company decided to ship the waste to Louisiana.

"One reason Exxon brought the waste to Louisiana was because Louisiana has the most strict oil field waste laws in the country," Callon said during questioning by Jarvis.

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The material was transported in accordance with law and according to state transportation guidelines covering hazardous materials. Placards were placed on the trucks and each glove compartment held manifests acknowledging the waste, he said.

"We did a site inspection in Grand Bois and followed all regulations. It was properly permitted and, as far as we knew, it was the right place to bring it," he said.

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