Five Patriot Workers Sue Mine Operator, Bosses

the Associated Press

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. (AP) — Five employees of the Federal No. 2 mine are suing Patriot Coal Corp., saying managers ignored high methane gas levels at least 19 times and put their lives in danger by failing to evacuate.

The Dominion Post (http://bit.ly/y3ZBbi [1]) says the employees sued St. Louis-based Patriot, its Eastern Associated Coal subsidiary and former and current mine managers in Monongalia County Circuit Court.

Patriot spokeswoman Janine Orf declined comment Thursday.

The workers are demanding $75,000 for themselves and any other "similarly situated" employee who lost income when the mine was later shut down. They also want unspecified compensatory and punitive damages.

The lawsuit is the latest stemming from a continuing federal investigation into problems at the mine near Fairview.

Last month, ex-foreman John Renner sued Patriot. He has admitted faking safety inspection reports but says his supervisors ordered him to do it. Renner has been awaiting sentencing on federal charges for nearly two years and is cooperating in the investigation.

Renner is among the individuals targeted in the new lawsuit. His attorney declined comment.

Mine workers John Palmer, Scott Lepka, Clif Tennant, DeWayne Jarvis and Robert Hillberry also named Renner's former bosses at the mine. The plaintiffs' attorney, Alex Shook, says most remain employed by either Patriot or Eastern.

The lawsuit says the managers' behavior not only endangered miners but also led to an extended idling of the mine, which caused economic hardship for the employees. The lawyers have fashioned a class-action case, arguing the number of affected people is in the hundreds.

Renner, 41, of Granville, says mine management pressured him to fake methane gas readings on sealed sections of the mine to avoid a shutdown that would have stopped production.

Federal regulations have required seal monitoring because of a January 2006 methane explosion in a sealed section of International Coal Group's Sago Mine. Twelve men were trapped for more than 40 hours by the blast and died of carbon monoxide poisoning. Only one survived.

The massive longwall operation at Federal No. 2 has more than 90 seals.

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Information from: The Dominion Post, http://www.dominionpost.com *[2]*

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