Federal Judge Delays Ex-BP Engineer's Trial

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A federal judge agreed Monday to postpone the trial of a former BP engineer charged with deleting text messages about the company's response to the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

Kurt Mix's trial was scheduled to start Feb. 25, but U.S. District Judge Stanwood Duval Jr. moved it to June 10 after conferring with defense attorneys and prosecutors. Duval agreed to give both sides more time to prepare.

Mix, a Katy, Texas, resident who worked on BP's effort to stop oil from spewing from its blown-out well in the Gulf, pleaded not guilty in May to two counts of obstruction of justice. His indictment accuses him of deleting text messages to a supervisor and a contractor to prevent them from being used in a federal grand jury probe.

The criminal charges against Mix were the first in the Justice Department's probe of the April 2010 rig explosion that killed 11 workers and spawned the nation's worst offshore oil spill.

Three other current or former BP employees were subsequently indicted on spill-related charges. BP well site leaders Robert Kaluza and Donald Vidrine have pleaded not guilty to manslaughter charges in the workers' deaths. Former BP executive David Rainey pleaded not guilty to concealing information from Congress about the amount of oil that was leaking from the well.

BP itself has agreed to plead guilty to manslaughter, obstruction of Congress and other charges and pay a record $4.5 billion in penalties.

Mix's indictment says he was instructed to retain all of his spill-related records, including text messages, but he allegedly deleted about 300 texts he sent to a supervisor who served as BP's drilling engineering manager for the Gulf and an outside contractor who also worked on the spill response.

Mix's attorneys say their client carefully preserved records that a BP vendor gave to the Justice Department, providing prosecutors with "smoking gun" evidence it used to charge BP and Rainey.

Each count of obstruction of justice carries a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison and a fine of up to $250,000.

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