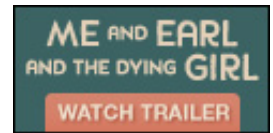


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## 2 Suits on Radium Cleanup Test Oil Industry's Liability

By KEITH SCHNEIDER, Special to The New York Times

**LAUREL, Miss.**— The nation's first legal test of the petroleum industry's liability for protecting workers and cleaning up radium contamination in the nation's oilfields is taking shape in this Mississippi pine belt city.

The major issue in two cases brought by the owners and former employees of a business that cleaned radioactive oil pipes is whether the oil industry disregarded its own technical reports and allowed radium to contaminate oilfield equipment without alerting or protecting workers.

Evidence collected in the cases, which are pending in Federal District Court in Hattiesburg, Miss., shows that the Government and the oil industry have known since the end of World War II that radium was leaching from deep mineral beds into water that was pumped to the surface along with oil.

Technical and scientific reports dating from 1948 spoke of radium contamination in oilfields. But oil industry executives said in court documents that they were not to blame for the radioactive contamination because they were not aware of the reports. Pipes Analyzed in 1986

The executives said they did not become aware of the potential threat until April 1986, when Mississippi authorities analyzed pipes and waste from an oilfield in Smith County, to the northwest of Laurel, and found radium in concentrations hundreds of times higher than normal. "If you don't know there's a problem, how can you be blamed?" said Michael D. Manka, an environmental specialist with Chevron U.S.A. Inc. in Houston, one of the companies named in the suit. "Production people did not have radiation monitoring equipment in the oilfield because we had no reason to have it there."

The lawsuits may ultimately decide whether oil companies can be held responsible for billions of dollars in expenses associated with cleaning up and disposing radioactive wastes at thousands of oil and gas sites around the nation. The survey by American Petroleum Institute, a trade group, said that although the levels vary from region to region, radium contamination has been found in oil and gas fields from Alaska to Florida.

State radiation specialists in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas have determined that radium contamination in oilfields is one of the major sources of exposure to radiation in the United States. The radiation measured in oil and gas industry equipment and in some products, like natural gas, exposes people to levels that are equal to and at times greater than workers receive in nuclear power plants.

Yet in contrast to the stringently regulated nuclear industry, oilfield radiation is unregulated except for very modest new protections for some workers in Texas and Louisiana. Disagreement on Risk

Mr. Manka and other industry experts say the risk of developing an illness from exposure to radium in the oil industry is close to zero. But in several homes here, the owners and former employees of Street Inc., a machining and pipe-cleaning business here, assert that the chronic exposure to low levels of radium in oilfield equipment produced painful injuries.

Dusty Todd, a 30-year-old machinist, worked for eight years at Street Inc., unaware that the pipes he repaired and cleaned were radioactive. Mr. Todd said he had been slowed by severe pains in the bones in his hips and hands for seven years. He believes that his condition was caused by exposure to radiation from handling contaminated pipe. Exposure to radium has been linked to severe bone deformities and skeletal injuries since the 1920's.

Clifton Walker, a 31-year-old machinist who worked at Street Inc. for six years, has a similar complaint. "I feel like I'm 50 or 60," he said. "I can hardly move when I get up in the morning."

In April 1986, Mississippi's radiation laboratory tested a sample of debris that had been scraped from the inside of a pipe pulled from a Chevron oilfield in Smith County. The analysis showed the sample had nearly 1,400 picocuries of radium per gram; the natural level in Mississippi soil is 4 to 8 picocuries. The Federal Energy Department considers radium levels in soil at its plants safe if they are 5 picocuries or less. Contamination in Soil

Eddie S. Fuente, the director of the state Division of Radiological Health, began an investigation that led to Laurel, 90 miles southeast of Jackson, where Chevron cleaned some of its pipes at Street Inc. Mr. Fuente's inspectors found extensive radium contamination in soil at the machining business and Street Inc., and radiation fields as high as 2,000 microrentgens per hour, 500 times the natural level. Federal work standards say workers must be protected from radiation fields of 2,000 microrentgens an hour or higher, but nuclear energy plants generally monitor their workers at 30 to 40 microrentgens an hour.

In August 1986, Winston Street, the 48-year-old co-owner of Street Inc., and his employees filed lawsuits against Chevron and the Shell Oil Company.

The first lawsuit contended that Chevron and Shell were negligent in failing to warn Mr. Street and ruined his business. "After it came out, there was a stigma attached to this radiation that just killed us," said Mr. Street as he stood in a yard of weeds that was once full of pipes and the

equipment to clean them.

In July 1989, Judge Henry T. Wingate of Federal District Court dismissed Mr. Street's assertion that Shell and Chevron had been grossly negligent in not issuing a warning about the radiation. But Judge Wingate said other issues in the case, including whether the oil companies were liable for damages, should be decided by a jury. A trial is scheduled for March. Suit Charging Injuries

The second suit, which has not been scheduled, asserts that 38 people -- the owners of Street Inc., employees and some family members -- suffered physical and psychological harm because of their exposure to low levels of radiation and that Shell and Chevron should have warned them about the "inherent dangers."

Chevron denied in court papers that radiation caused any illnesses or injuries in Laurel. Shell said in a statement, "We have seen no scientifically supportable evidence that naturally occurring radioactive materials, as observed since 1986 in Mississippi, have caused or will cause any adverse health effects."

In 1987 Shell and Chevron spent \$100,000 to dig up contaminated soil in the Street Inc. pipe yard and send it to a Chevron mill in Texas for disposal.

Mr. Street says the cases will turn on evidence uncovered in the companies' files and in technical articles that he says show the oil industry was aware of radium contamination in the United States and took no action.

One document was an internal memorandum Mr. Street found in Chevron's files. In the memorandum, dated Nov. 29, 1982, Dr. L. Max Scott, a radiation health specialist for Gulf Oil, which was bought by Chevron in 1984, said unusually high radiation readings had been detected around several wells near Bolton, Miss. Dr. Scott said in the memorandum that the excess radiation did not pose a threat to workers.

"However," he wrote, "I recommend that the Mississippi State Board of Health be informed that radiation levels significantly above normal background have been observed. If you desire, I can draft a letter of notification or contact them personally."

In an interview, Dr. Scott, who is now the radiation safety officer at Louisiana State University, said he called the Mississippi Division of Radiological Health but could not remember whom he talked to.

Mr. Fuente, the division's director, said he had no record that such a call was ever made. "If he had called, we would have investigated the situation," Mr. Fuente said.

Photos: Radioactive oilfield pipes are common in fences and other structures in the South. In Bear Four, Miss., Winston Street of Street Inc., a pipe-cleaning company, measured radiation in a fence made of oilfield pipe at the Horseman's Dream riding club. "Now we know it's all over the place,"

he said. Eddie S. Fuente of the Mississippi Division of Radiological Health said test results showed that debris from oilfield pipes "was a rather large problem." (Photographs by Hubert Worley Jr. for The New York Times) Map of Mississippi showing location of Laurel

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