

## **GE Engine Faulted For Crash That Killed 9**

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Nigel Duara, Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — An Oregon jury ruled Tuesday that a problem with an engine was responsible for the 2008 crash of a helicopter that killed nine firefighters during a wildfire in Northern California.

The jury in Portland reached its verdict after a pilot who survived and the widow of one who was killed sued General Electric for \$177 million.

The plaintiffs argued the company knew the engines it made for the Sikorsky S-61N helicopter had a design flaw making the equipment unsafe.

GE countered that the helicopter crashed because it was carrying too much weight when it took off after picking up a firefighting crew battling the Iron 44 wildfire in Shasta-Trinity National Forest near Weaverville, Calif.

"They're heroes," plaintiffs' attorney Greg Anderson said of the pilots, William Coultas and Roark Schwanenberg. "They saved as many people as they could. They have been pilloried before this."

The chopper was airborne less than a minute when it clipped a tree and fell from the sky, bursting into flames.

Four people survived, including Coultas of Cave Junction.

The plaintiffs and family members in court for the verdict dabbed their eyes and exchanged stiff handshakes with GE's attorneys. They declined to speak with reporters after the verdict was read.

After a two-year investigation, the National Transportation Safety Board concluded in 2010 that too much weight and a lack of oversight caused the crash.

The lawsuit decided Tuesday was brought by Coultas, his wife and the estate of Schwanenberg, who died in the crash.

The jury awarded \$28.4 million to the estate of Schwanenberg. Coultas was awarded \$37 million and his wife \$4.3 million by the jury.

The jury put most of the blame — 57 percent — on GE but also found the helicopter's owner and its manufacturer partially at fault.

Helicopter operator Carson Helicopters was dismissed from the case, and Sikorsky Aircraft Corp. previously settled with the plaintiffs.

GE Aviation spokesman Rick Kennedy said the company will appeal the verdict,

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though it must first look at the full language.

"We strongly disagree with the verdict," Kennedy said. "Our position has been all along that this verdict completely contradicts findings by the NTSB."

A statement from Carson Helicopters said the company had blamed GE's engine for the crash and felt the verdict brought light and closure to the incident.

Jurors put 23 percent of the blame for the crash on Carson Helicopters, and 20 percent on Sikorsky Aircraft Corp., even though neither is financially liable in the current legal action.

Anderson argued during the trial in Portland that GE knew for at least six years that there was a problem with a fuel control valve on the engine, The Oregonian reported. But rather than correct the problem, Anderson said, the company treated it like a service issue.

Anderson introduced as evidence a GE internal email from Aug. 6, 2008, the day after the crash, discussing the size of the fuel filter, noting that the military version removes much smaller particles than the commercial version.

GE attorney Kevin Smith argued that the helicopter crashed because it was more than 1,400 pounds overweight at takeoff, and that the pilots were relying on inadequate information about the weight and liftoff power provided by the owners of the helicopter, Carson Helicopters of Grants Pass.

Smith said sound spectrum analysis from cockpit recorders showed the helicopter was at full power when it hit one tree and then another before crashing to the ground about 150 yards from the helipad where it picked up the firefighting crew to take them back to camp.

Along with pilot Schwanenberg, 54, of Lostine, those killed included Jim Ramage, 63, a U.S. Forest Service inspector pilot from Redding, Calif.; and firefighters Shawn Blazer, 30, of Medford; Scott Charlson, 25, of Phoenix, Ore.; Matthew Hammer, 23, of Grants Pass; Edrik Gomez, 19, of Ashland; Bryan Rich, 29, of Medford; David Steele, 19, of Ashland; and Steven "Caleb" Renno, 21, of Cave Junction.

The families of eight men who were killed and three who were injured reached out-of-court settlements with three of five defendants in multiple lawsuits filed after the crash.

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