

Feds Probe Worker Safety At GA Auto Parts Maker

The Associated Press

LAGRANGE, Ga. (AP) — Federal authorities are questioning working conditions at a Georgia auto parts plant for the eighth time in four years, this time in connection with a worker's death.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration launched an inquiry of Sewon American in LaGrange after someone submitted a complaint of excessive heat same the same day Teresa Pickard died, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution (<http://bit.ly/156G6FN> [1]) reports.

Federal regulators have discovered multiple violations at the plant since it opened in 2009.

Pickard died May 29 after saying she was having breathing troubles. The state medical examiner has not released a cause of death.

OSHA has no specific rules regarding workplace temperatures, but the general rules require employers to protect worker safety.

The firm, which makes chassis and other parts for Kia and Hyundai, released a statement saying that Pickard's "death was not work related."

Several employees told the Atlanta newspaper that the plant has inadequate air conditioning that yields stifling heat, particularly around welding lines.

Kim Ray, a former employee who inspected finished parts, said she once went to the emergency room after a shift because she was dehydrated. "They never turned the AC on," she said. Other employees said there is not enough convenient access to water.

Jerome Walls Jr., a former employee who was fired, said the heat was intense enough that candy bars in a break-room vending machine melted.

The company statement said: "Sewon is an air-conditioned facility, provides fans at employee stations, and has water strategically placed for the employees' use."

Sewon has faced fines before for willingly ignoring safety problems that threaten workers' health. That is OSHA's most serious violation.

"We have been to this place eight times in four years," Ben Ross, an OSHA administrator, told the newspaper. "We consider that a lot. Traditionally, we don't get to most companies but one time."

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Sewon America is a subsidiary of Sewon Group, which is based in Daegu, South Korea.

The LaGrange plant, located about 70 miles southwest of Atlanta, is one of about a dozen auto supplier factories in Georgia. It has about 850 employees.

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