

GROOM LAKE PLAINTIFF SUCCUMBS TO CANCER

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By Warren Bates

A former worker who sued the government alleging violations at an Air Force operating location near Groom Lake has died, prompting the attorney handling the case to ask if his wife can be substituted as a plaintiff.

George Washington University law professor Jonathan Turley, who represents six former base workers and the widow of another, said the man recently died of cancer, declining to elaborate on his illness. The suit contends that hazardous waste dumping at the base, which is 35 miles west of Alamo in Lincoln County, caused workers to suffer various medical problems .

A current court order has allowed the workers to remain anonymous. But Turley said he will ask U.S. District Judge Philip Pro to add the man's widow as a named plaintiff.

"(The death) has had a sobering effect on an already serious case," Turley said. "It is easy to lose sight of the fact that these workers, while anonymous, are real individuals with, in some cases, serious medical problems."

He said he expects that once the widow is allowed into the suit, the workers' affidavit will be unsealed, leading to additional discovery in the case.

"We hope to gather additional information from the (government) on his medical and employment history," Turley said. "Thus far they have been unwilling to share that. We will continue to ask the court to access to documents that have no national security value."

Pro has already ruled against the workers on the issue of what types of chemicals have been used at the base. He did so after U.S. Secretary of the Air Force Sheila Widnall submitted an affidavit explaining why the government felt disclosures would be a grave threat to national security.

Turley said that in response he is filing under seal an Air Force Security manual containing much of what the military has deemed classified. He said the manual itself has been marked unclassified.

He said he will ask Pro to accept the document and then unseal it, which will prompt a review of the military's position.

"We have repeatedly objected to the use of national security for purely tactical purposes in this case," he said.

The Air Force does not acknowledge a military base with an airstrip and hangars exists at Groom Lake. The Air Force only confirms "there is an operating location near Groom dry lake."

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