

Amoco under fire

Stink doesn't suit professor

by Shauna Peets

Jeremy Williams is upset, and so are thousands of others, but Williams is doing something about it.

The U of A law professor, along with sixteen students, filed a civil law suit against Amoco "requesting damages for injuries suffered" as a result of the Amoco well blow-out twelve miles northwest of Lodgepole.

The poisonous hydrogen sulfide fumes emitted from the well are not considered dangerous, however, there have been no studies to determine whether or not prolonged exposure to the low concentrate H₂S fumes are harmful. Williams believes he has evidence that proves prolonged exposure to the fumes has caused injury.

According to the Faculty of Agriculture's 1976 research bulletin, Manure Gases In The Animal Environment, "among the sub-acute and chronic effects of exposure to H₂S, eye irritation or 'gas eye' is the most common."

The manual goes on to say that, "in man, the eyes may itch, smart and feel as though grains of sand were on the eyes."

Reportedly, the concentrations of the gas have been low but the manual points out that, "at low

concentrations, all of the mucous membranes of the respiratory tract are irritated causing hoarseness, cough and nasal secretion."

The plaintiff's claim includes general damages of \$50,000 and punitive damages of \$1,000,000. Williams will act as attorney and believes Amoco is going to fight "tooth and nail". Amoco's Manager of Public and Government Affairs, Pat O'Connell, has no public statement, only "We're working on a statement of defense." According to Williams, it is likely that Amoco, before the hearing date, will ask the court to dismiss the suit as being "frivolous and vexacious."

It is possible that more plaintiffs may be included in Williams' class action suit, or file their own. If more suits are filed, Williams will not be surprised. He has already received about 150 calls from concerned citizens.

Since November 1st, when the suit was filed, Williams has received both criticism and support. Certain 'citizens' from Calgary tell him that "This is the price of progress and Albertans should put up with it."

Williams is well aware that gas well blow-outs may be unforeseen and

perhaps even unavoidable, however, he maintains that the gas companies should take every measure to ensure the health and safety of the public. In this respect Williams believes that Amoco "was not doing its best."

Williams is also disappointed and surprised that the government has not taken a more responsible position. According to Williams there is a provision under the Provincial Board of Health which allows the government to take action in capping the well. The government could hire wild well cappers and hand the bill to Amoco. Williams has reservations about former Amoco well-capper Joe-Bob Bowden's competence. "Why should it take this long?"

The effectiveness of new well cappers, Boots and Coots will not be known for at least a month. In the meantime Northern Albertans won't have to put up with the smell of hydrogen sulfide. As long as H₂S burns, there is no odor. This does not mean that the atmosphere is safe. When H₂S burns, it turns into sulphur dioxide, the component of acid rain.

The outcome of the suit will not be known for more than a year. The plaintiffs in the case, represented by Williams, have decided to give their settlement to charity if they win. Williams says, "It's not so much the money, as people just want to put a stop to it."



Jeremy Williams is suing Amoco over the big stink at Lodgepole

photo Ray Giguere

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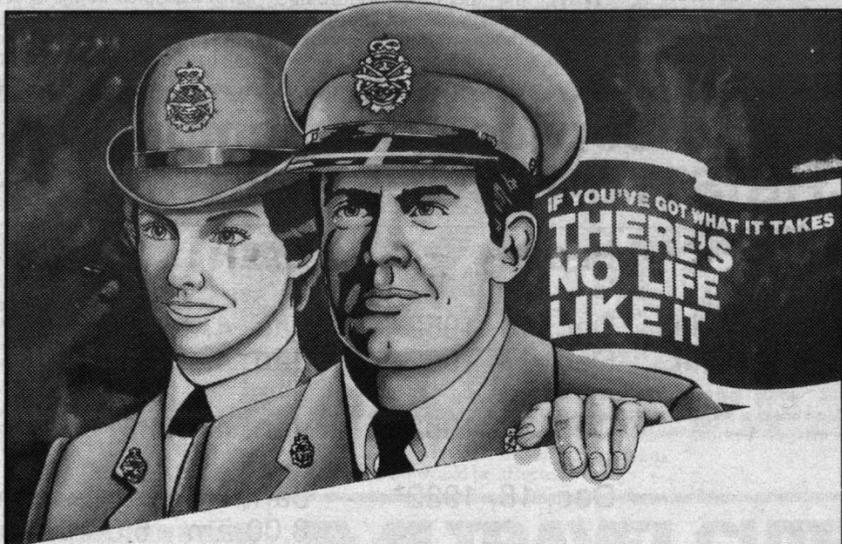
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