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Family awarded \$1 billion in lawsuit

Exxon Mobil hit for radioactive land

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A retired Jefferson Parish judge and his family have won more than \$1 billion in damages from Exxon Mobil Corp. over radioactivity left behind by an oil-field pipe operation on their land in Harvey. The oil company said the judgment is excessive and will be appealed.

A New Orleans civil jury Tuesday ordered Exxon to pay \$56 million to clean up the 33-acre tract; \$145,000 for lost property value; and \$1 billion in exemplary, or punitive, damages to former Jefferson Parish state District Judge Joseph Grefer and his family in what their attorneys say is the biggest judgment ever for a single piece of property in Louisiana.

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Award called biggest ever for land plot

AWARD, from A-1

said Stuart Smith, co-lead attorney for the Grefers.

Exxon attorney Gregory Weiss said he thinks the company has a substantial basis for appeal. "I don't think that justice was done," Weiss said.

Exxon did not deny there was radiation on the land but gave a vastly different assessment of how much "naturally occurring radioactive material," or NORM, was on the land bounded by Paillet Street, Breaux Avenue, St. Joseph Lane and 16th Street.

The Grefers, who filed suit in 1997, had leased the land for about three decades to Intracoastal Tubular Services. The company cleaned used oil-field pipe for Exxon. The Grefers said the contamination was extensive and even underground. During the trial their attorneys and attorneys for Intracoastal presented memoranda and other documents they say

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showed that Exxon officials were aware of the possible dangers of radioactivity in the muddy scale on some pipes, but didn't tell the public or their contractors.

The jury found Intracoastal 5 percent responsible for the damages but passed them on to Exxon. The defunct company's owner, John Hooper, said he is "relieved."

Attorney Patricia Weeks, who also represented Exxon, said the jury was provided much evidence concerning what was needed to restore the Grefers' land. Weeks said justice was lost in the jury's disregard of that evidence.

Grefer's attorneys said the tract's value without any contamination is \$1.5 million, but attorneys for Exxon said it is worth \$500,000.

Nearly all the jurors refused to comment. They said they agreed after the trial that they wouldn't speak to reporters. However, one juror said she did not agree with the amount of the judgment.

Grefer, whose legal team included Jack Harang, Michael Stag, Ron Austin and Roger

Stetter, said he and his family are happy with the verdict but aren't celebrating yet.

"This is a battle, not a war. We won a battle," he said.

Grefer said the land will be cleaned. "We started putting the fence around it," he said, adding that if money from the case is not forthcoming, they will pay for the cleanup "as best we can."

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