



Business

May 11, 2007, 11:42PM

Court date set for contractors suing BP over illness claims

By **TOM FOWLER**
Copyright 2007 Houston Chronicle

A January trial date has been set for a case involving dozens of contractors at BP's Texas City refinery who say they were exposed to a dangerous chemical while working there in April.

The lawsuit, filed in a Galveston federal court, accuses the company of trying to cover up an April 19 incident where dozens of workers doing repairs and upgrades on an oil-processing unit were taken to hospitals after complaining of eye irritation and nausea. The workers were treated and released.

BP said Friday it still cannot determine what caused the symptoms, and that air monitors did not detect any substance that could be responsible. The company also has looked for possible emissions sources outside the refinery but hasn't turned up anything, said spokesman Scott Dean.

Anthony Buzbee, the attorney representing the workers, expressed skepticism at the company's continuing contention that it couldn't find any proof of a toxic release.

He said based on discussions with clients he believes they came in contact with hydrogen sulfide — a chemical common around refineries that smells like rotten eggs and can be deadly.

Dean said all workers at the facility wear pager-sized hydrogen sulfide detectors while on site and that none of the devices worn by the affected work crews detected the gas.

U.S. District Judge Samuel Kent set the trial date at a hearing Friday. BP is expected to hand over documents related to its investigation to plaintiffs' attorneys sometime Monday.

The unit where the incident occurred is known as a crude distillation tower and is used in the first step of the oil refining process. The unit had been down since Hurricane Rita in late 2005 but had been cleaned out completely several weeks before the incident, Dean said.

The workers were welding and doing other tasks at the time of the incident, he said.

tom.fowler@chron.com

VOICES OF HOUSTON

Readers are solely responsible for the content of the comments they post here. Comments are subject to the site's terms and conditions of use and do not necessarily reflect the opinion or approval of the Houston Chronicle.

POWERED BY Pluck