



U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

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**PRESS RELEASE**

7-20-11

## Mason County Forest Products Settles EEOC Sex Discrimination Lawsuit

### ***Federal Agency Obtains \$900,000 for Workers Told 'Women Don't Belong Here'***

SEATTLE — Mason County Forest Products, which operated a saw and wood planing mill in Shelton, Wash., agreed to pay \$900,000 to two female workers to settle a federal lawsuit alleging sexual harassment, sex discrimination and retaliation, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) announced today.

The EEOC's investigation showed that two women faced widespread hostility, and that upper management at the mill chose to ignore the harassment, saying, "Boys will be boys." Their supervisor made it clear that he did not want women on his crew, using demeaning comments, physical intimidation and verbal threats. He condoned and participated in crude and misogynistic language reducing women to body parts, the EEOC said. The male employees targeted their female co-workers with lewd comments and gestures, displayed sex toys and pornography in a locker, and positioned the women's portable lavatory for optimal surveillance. Sometimes, the EEOC said, they would lock the female workers inside and push the unit back and forth, sloshing the contents around them. Ultimately, the supervisor fired the two women, resulting in the all-male crew he frequently promoted as his ideal.

Sex discrimination, including sexual harassment, and retaliation for complaining about it violate Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. After first attempting to reach a pre-litigation settlement through conciliation, the EEOC filed the lawsuit (*EEOC v. Mason County Forest Products*, Civil Number CV-09-5609 RBL) in U.S. District Court for the District of Washington. Seattle private attorney Scott Blankenship represented the two victims and served as co-lead counsel with the EEOC.

In addition to paying the women \$900,000, the company agreed to a three-year consent decree. Although the Mason County Forest Products sawmill stopped operation in 2010, the decree requires parent company Long Bell Ventures, LLC to implement corrective measures such as comprehensive training at any new sawmill facility it may open in the next three years.

"I stood up for myself and, ultimately, through this process, for other women," said Debbie Berntsen, one of the two discrimination victims. "Companies like this need to know that they can't allow women to be treated this way in any workplace."

EEOC Regional Attorney William R. Tamayo pointed out that more than a third of all charges seen by the Commission involve retaliation, and that, for the first time ever, retaliation under all statutes (36,258) surpassed race (35,890) as the most frequently filed charge at the EEOC in fiscal year 2010.

Tamayo said, "Employers who try to solve a harassment problem by getting rid of the people who speak out about it will only add to that statistic. We hope this settlement will remind employers to respond properly to complaints about harassment or discrimination, with timely investigation and steps to end any misconduct found."

EEOC Supervisory Trial Attorney John Stanley said, "Management can make a huge difference in setting the tone for its work force. Making the excuse that 'Boys will be boys' is sexist and patronizing. Surely it's appropriate to set the expectation that your employees will act as mature adults working in a professional, respectful environment free of harassment."

The EEOC enforces federal laws prohibiting employment discrimination. Further information about the EEOC is available on its web site at [www.eeoc.gov](http://www.eeoc.gov).