

PG&E ordered to pay ex-employee over safety, racial issues



PG&E vehicles and equipment, visible on a web page detailing PG&E safety gas and electricity efforts. PG&E must pay an ex-employee because the company allegedly retaliated against the former worker after he brought safety issues and racial problems at the utility to PG&E's attention, a jury verdict that raises fresh questions about the embattled utility's commitment to safety.

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SAN FRANCISCO — PG&E must pay an ex-employee because it retaliated against him after he brought safety issues and racial problems at the utility to the company's attention, a jury has determined, raising fresh questions about the utility's commitment to safety.

A San Francisco County Superior Court jury determined that PG&E must pay \$341,168 to Daryl Woodruff, a former electrical maintenance and construction supervisor.

The jury awarded the payment to the fired worker because it decided PG&E retaliated against Woodruff for cooperating in a race-discrimination investigation and for reporting concerns about the inadequacy of PG&E safety inspections in the wake of a transformer explosion in the Bernal Heights district of San Francisco in 2015. The jury reached its verdict July 20.

"I have waited to clear my name," Woodruff said Monday. "I feel vindicated and thankful for the jury's findings. I hope that Pacific Gas & Electric will make sure that no other employee is ever retaliated against for speaking up in the interest of safety and anti-discrimination."

San Francisco-based PG&E has been embroiled in multiple safety-related incidents that have tarnished its reputation. Among these incidents, PG&E was found to have caused a 2010 fatal

explosion that killed eight and destroyed a San Bruno neighborhood. State regulators imposed a \$1.6 billion penalty on PG&E for causing the natural gas blast, in the largest financial punishment ever imposed on an American utility. A federal jury later convicted PG&E for crimes it committed before and after the blast in a decision that branded the company as a felon.

PG&E also faces an uncertain future because of its role in a series of deadly wildfires in October that torched the North Bay Wine Country and other regions. State investigators have determined that the utility bears a measure of responsibility for at least 12 of the blazes.

Some PG&E critics have raised questions about whether the utility has learned its lesson in connection with explosions, fires and other incidents over the past eight years.

During the jury trial that led to the award this month for the fired employee, PG&E made safety-first claims, according to Jean Krasilnikoff, an attorney with the Oakland-based law firm Siegel LeWitter Malkani who was one of Woodruff's lawyers in the case.

"In their opening statement, PG&E said that it had learned its lesson and that the company had made changes," Krasilnikoff said. "PG&E really needs to be held to a high standard, because they do hold the public's safety in their hands."

PG&E said Monday that it believes in emphasizing safety.

"The company stands behind the employment actions it took in the name of public safety," PG&E said in prepared comments emailed to this news organization. "We are aware of the jury's decision and are currently evaluating our next legal steps."

The utility also asserted that claims of race discrimination were resolved in PG&E's favor prior to the start of the trial, according to company spokesman John Kaufman.

Despite PG&E's statement, the attorneys for the fired employee believe the company acted in a retaliatory fashion against Woodruff.

"PG&E lined up several witnesses to try to undercut Mr. Woodruff's credibility, and we're glad the jury didn't buy that," Krasilnikoff said. "Like a lot of companies when they are called out for wrongdoing, PG&E circled the wagons."

Woodruff and his attorneys stated that he was simply attempting to do his job in bringing safety concerns to PG&E's attention.

"PG&E is not above the law," said Jonathan Siegel, one of Woodruff's attorneys at the Siegel LeWitter Malkani firm.



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