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Widow Sues Hess for Wrongful Death Over Benzene Exposure as Chevron Assumes Liability Post-Acquisition

The lawsuit claims Francis Edward's exposure to benzene through paints and solvents at the refinery directly led to his multiple myeloma diagnosis; Chevron, which acquired Hess in a \$53B deal, is now responsible for defending such legacy claims.

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The widow of a man who died of cancer attributed to benzene exposure is now suing the Hess Corporation for negligence and wrongful death.

Francis Edward worked at the refinery on St. Croix for about twenty years, starting in the mid-1960s. He was a laborer and painter, “which caused him to be regularly and routinely exposed to

benzene and products containing benzene,” claims a lawsuit filed by Fediana Joseph, his widow.

The benzene came from the refining process, as well as from the chemicals he utilized as a painter; solvents, paints, thinners, among others.

Forty-odd years after leaving the employ of the refinery, the St. Lucian-born Edward was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a cancer of the blood's plasma cells. According to the lawsuit, Mr. Edward was diagnosed in July 2023, and died at the end of September 2024.

His sickness and death, the lawsuit claims, “were the direct and proximate result of his repeated exposure to benzene and products containing benzene during his employment at Hess Oil refinery.”

On July 18, Hess Corporation was acquired by Chevron Corporation in a \$53 billion all-stock deal. The acquisition, finalized after an arbitration ruling by the International Chamber of Commerce dismissed ExxonMobil's claim to Hess's Guyana assets, integrates Hess's operations, including its historical liabilities, into Chevron's portfolio. This merger may influence the legal proceedings, as Chevron now assumes responsibility for defending against claims related to Hess's past operations, including those at the St. Croix refinery.

Hess, the lawsuit claims, “failed to provide Mr. Edward with proper protective equipment, including appropriate respirators, that would have reduced his exposure to benzene.”

The company also failed to adequately educate their employee about the risks of benzene exposure, and also neglected to implement sufficient safety protocols to minimize said exposure, the civil complaint alleges.

As a result, Hess is liable for negligence, wrongful death, and loss of consortium, the lawsuit argues. The complaint asks the court to award compensatory and punitive damages if a jury finds such liability. The lawsuit also names the Virgin Islands Industrial Maintenance Corporation as a defendant; however, that entity was administratively dissolved in 2023.

The acquisition by Chevron raises questions about the handling of ongoing litigation, including this wrongful death lawsuit. Legal experts suggest that Chevron, as the acquiring entity, may face increased scrutiny over historical safety practices at Hess facilities, potentially impacting the scope of compensatory and punitive damages sought by plaintiffs like Fediana Joseph. The integration of Hess's assets and liabilities into Chevron's operations could also prompt a review of similar claims from other former employees exposed to hazardous substances at Hess refineries.