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Former State's Seismologist Deposed in Oklahoma Earthquake Case

October 19, 2017 | Scott Poynter



Last week, Plaintiffs' counsel took the deposition of former state seismologist Dr. Austin Holland in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Dr. Holland left Oklahoma Geological Survey ("OGS") in July of 2015, citing increased hours and need to balance work and family.

But that was only half the story.

Dr. Holland testified that he quit his dream job in Oklahoma, because he was reprimanded for a study he published in 2015 that linked Oklahoma's seismicity to wastewater disposal operations by the oil and gas industry.

Holland's testimony was that he was called into his boss's office and "reprimanded" for his work, which University of Oklahoma Dean Larry Griollot termed as "unacceptable." In all, Dr. Holland said it was one of those conversations you don't think you will ever have with a supervisor, and further, one you wish you had a recorder with you to tape the statements being made.

Further, Dr. Holland testified that his OGS colleague Amberlee Darold was also reprimanded for public statements she made to media that linked Oklahoma's earthquakes to wastewater disposal. According to Holland, Darold's bosses at OGS ordered her to never speak to the press again.

The deposition was taken in the class action case filed in Lincoln County that involves the large earthquakes near Prague in November 2011. Scientists that have studied this seismicity have issued peer-reviewed scientific papers that have concluded that the quakes were not naturally occurring earthquakes, but instead were created by the oil and gas industry from their disposal of wastewater resulting from fracking operations.

In about March 2013, then OU scientist Katie Keranen published a study linking the Prague quakes to wastewater disposal wells operated nearby by both New Dominion and Spess Oil.

Under oath, Dr. Holland said he participated in a meeting with his Director at OGS, which also included as a participant New Dominion's VP of Exploration, Jean Antonides. The meeting occurred just after the Keranen study was out, and Holland testified that the purpose of the meeting was to develop a plan to respond to the Keranen scientific paper.

Holland, in sworn testimony, said New Dominion (which the Keranen study tagged as one of the culprits of the Prague quakes of November 2011) said it had a plan in place to sue Keranen and had drafted a complaint, and further, wanted to make her life "uncomfortable."

As a result of this meeting, OGS issued a position statement regarding the Prague earthquakes on March 22, 2013. The position statement was specifically published in response to the Keranen study. The conclusion of the position statement was that the Prague earthquake sequence "was the result of natural causes."

Holland testified that he wrote the initial draft of this position statement, but his words were changed by then OGS Director Randy Keller. Importantly, Holland testified that the position statement's conclusion that the Prague quakes were the result of natural causes was "misleading."

In the end, Dr. Holland testified that his opinion, by the time he left OGS in 2015, was that the November 2011 Prague earthquake sequence was caused by wastewater disposal wells operated nearby to a 80% to 90% degree of scientific certainty.

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