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Sawmill company negligent in deadly Mill Fire in northern California, family claims in lawsuit

Legal action follows two deaths and destruction of dozens of homes



WEED, CALIFORNIA – SEPTEMBER 3: A tangled pile of twisted metal is all that remains on Saturday morning, Sep. 3, 2022, of a Roseburg Forest Products building destroyed in yesterday's Mill Fire in Weed, Calif. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

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A family who lost their home this month in a deadly fire that started at a sawmill in the Northern California town of Weed filed a lawsuit Thursday blaming the sawmill company.

The suit came a day after Roseburg Forest Products, which has operations across North America, admitted the Mill Fire started at its mill in Weed but said it may have been caused by failure of a third-party company's sprinkler system to cool hot ash.

Cal Fire, in charge of investigating the 4,000-acre blaze that started Sept. 2 and is nearly contained, said Thursday the cause of the fire, which killed two people and destroyed dozens of homes, remained under investigation.

The lawsuit filed in Sacramento County Superior Court by Nichole and Shayne Hammond, which also names their three children as plaintiffs, claimed Roseburg acted with “negligence and conscious disregard” for the safety of the community by failing to ensure safe operations at its mill and prioritizing profits.

Residents of Weed’s Lincoln Heights neighborhood, a [historic Black community](#) dating back to the early part of last century, described a fast-moving inferno that swept northward from the mill. Dozens of homes were flattened to rubble [by the blaze](#), with others destroyed a few miles to the north in the Lake Shastina area.

Roseburg said Wednesday in a press release that its Weed mill produces electricity by burning wood remnants, and that the resulting hot ash is sprayed with water to cool it. “Roseburg is investigating whether the third-party machine failed to cool the ash sufficiently which thereby ignited the fire,” [the release said](#). The company is “working closely with state and local investigators to determine if this is the case,” the release said.

James Frantz, the lawyer representing the Hammond family in the lawsuit, expressed skepticism about Roseburg’s claim that another company’s equipment may have been responsible for the fire. Frantz, who has represented plaintiffs in fire-related lawsuits against PG&E and utility Southern California Edison, claimed Roseburg was using the third-party sprinkler maker as a “scapegoat.”

“We want to get firsthand knowledge about what (Roseburg) knew about the safety or dangerousness of storing that ash,” Frantz said Thursday afternoon.

Speaking for Roseburg, Pete Hillan, a partner in San Francisco crisis-PR firm Singer Associates, said it was too early for the company to respond directly to the allegations in the lawsuit. Roseburg’s suspicion that a failure of the sprinkler system may have caused the fire is based on the blaze burning two buildings at the mill, one of which had “active ash” inside it in a cement bunker.

Roseburg, founded in 1936 in Roseburg, Oregon, owns more than 600,000 acres of forest in Oregon, Virginia and North Carolina, and has operations in more than 200 locations across North America, according to company promotional materials. Frantz said two lawyers from his firm will be holding town halls in Yreka, just north of Weed, in the coming days, and he expected more people affected by the fire to join the legal action.