

Judge approves settlement for claims of diet drug damage

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — A federal judge has approved a proposed \$3.75 billion national settlement of health claims stemming from the diet drug combination fen-phen, which has been linked to potentially fatal heart valve damage.

Under the settlement approved Monday, fen-phen users would get up to \$1.5 million, though most would get far less, depending on their level of injury and how long they took the drugs. The settlement also includes money for future medical monitoring.

U.S. District Judge Louis C. Bechtel gave preliminary approval to the settlement in November. Barring an appeal, attorneys said fen-phen users could begin receiving settlement checks as early as January.

More than 9,000 lawsuits have

been filed against American Home Products, maker of fenfluramine, the "fen" in the fen-phen diet drug combination. The Madison, N.J.-based company sold the combination under

the brand name of Pondimin and also made Redux, a chemical cousin.

The drugs were withdrawn in September 1997 after a Mayo Clinic study linked fen-phen to potentially fatal heart valve damage. The second drug in the combination, phentermine, was not linked to the problems.

"The settlement resolves the vast majority of the claims and potential claims that the company was facing, and it's a very, very significant step forward in resolving the litigation," said Michael Scott of Philadelphia, one of the attorneys representing American Home.

Attorney Edward F. Blizzard of Houston had objected to the settlement in June on behalf of a group of diet-drug users, saying it would likely be reversed because of all the other lawsuits pending.

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— Michael Scott
attorney representing
American Home

Workers demand job security

BATH, Maine (AP) — Striking workers at the Bath Iron Works, builder of Navy destroyers, walked picket lines Monday in a demand for more money and job security.

About 85 percent of the union members who cast ballots voted in favor of the strike, the shipyard's first walkout in 15 years, said John Portela, a union financial officer.

A shipyard spokeswoman said the company felt its offer was fair and that the overwhelming rejection of the contract proposal for 4,800 employees came as a surprise. "We're preparing to go back to the table," spokeswoman Sue Pieter said Sunday.

The workers' contract expired at midnight, shutting down production at one of only two shipyards that build Aegis destroyers. The last strike at the subsidiary of General Dynamics was a 99-day walkout in 1985.

"I want what I'm worth, and General Dynamics can well afford it," Paul Avery, a shipyard rigger, said Monday. As managers arrived at work Monday morning, dozens of rowdy shipbuilders waved signs and yelled at them.

At another military contractor, nearly 3,000 workers went on strike Sunday against 10 Massachusetts plants of Raytheon Co. Most work at the company's Andover plant which makes most of the Patriot missile. Raytheon's best-known defense product. Hawk defense systems are also made there.

Raytheon workers' union, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 1505, said the company's proposals for a four-year contract don't do enough to protect manufacturing jobs.

Bureau to construct fencing for bat caves

PHOENIX (AP) — Only pitch-black shafts with drops of up to 600 feet are left where roughly 100,000 copper, gold and silver mines once operated throughout Arizona.

To humans, these abandoned mines represent an injury waiting to happen because of their collapsing tunnel walls and leftover toxic gases. But to the 28 bat species living in Arizona, they are home.

The Bureau of Land Management and the Arizona Department of Game and Fish are working to eliminate the threat by building bat gates that will still allow bats in while keeping humans out.

"For bats, (the mines) are a way to escape the heat," said Elroy Masters, a wildlife biologist for BLM in Lake Havasu City. "And the mines protect them over the winter if we get freezing days so they can hibernate."

The gates are made of steel and iron and have small spaces that are just large enough to let bats through.

Masters is currently working to construct fencing and bat gates at Lake Havasu's Cienega Mining

District, where there are about 90 open shafts.

"We're trying to protect bats to keep them from becoming listed on the Endangered Species Act," Masters said.

Bats have a low reproductive rate of about one baby per year, said Tim Snow, a non-game specialist for Arizona Game and Fish.

Despite their relatively well-hidden existence, biologists say bats serve several important functions, such as pollinating saguaro and agave plants and controlling insects.

"They're prolific insect catchers," said Yar Petryszun, a bat researcher with the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Arizona. One bat can consume about 200 insects an hour — up to half its weight in one night, he said.

Petryszun works with the U.S. Forest Service monitoring bat populations and studying how they adapt to using bat gates at an abandoned copper mine at the Coronado National Memorial on the Arizona-Mexico border.

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