

## **Firefighting company charged with DUI in fatal crash**

Associated Press

Nov. 6, 2003 08:48 AM

PORTLAND, Ore. - A firefighting company has been charged with criminal drunken driving and other counts for its role in an August crash in which eight of its employees died in a fiery head-on collision.

Malheur County prosecutor Daniel Norris alleges that supervisors at First Strike Environmental knew a large amount of alcohol was purchased during the firefighters' trip home from an Idaho wildfire, but didn't intervene.

"If your agents are going to condone the use of alcohol that killed eight young men, then your corporation will have to suffer the consequences," Norris said Wednesday.

All eight First Strike employees in the van died Aug. 24 when the vehicle crossed a double yellow line and collided with a truck near Vale in eastern Oregon. The driver and some of the passengers were drunk, tests showed.

Circuit Court Judge J. Burdette Pratt arraigned the Roseburg-based company Wednesday on one count of drunken driving, one count of reckless driving and 18 counts of reckless endangerment.

Norris said the company could be fined \$5,000 for each of the 20 misdemeanors.

During the arraignment, First Strike's attorney, David Terry, said the company will plead innocent if its motion to dismiss the case is rejected. The judge set a hearing for Jan. 5.

Terry said it is illogical to file drunken driving charges against a company.

"I have never seen it happen, nor has any prosecutor, defense attorney or judge I have spoken to," Terry said. "Not to put too fine a turn on it, but it's ludicrous."

Norris, however, said such charges have been filed by the state and other Oregon communities.

No charges have been filed against employees of the company, but Norris said a grand jury will be convened this month to consider charges against two supervisors who he said saw the crew buy beer at a convenience store.

State officials had reportedly been concerned about a pattern of drunk and disorderly incidents involving First Strike crews for more than a year before the fatal crash.

All the company's crews were suspended after the crash and ordered to complete a drug and alcohol awareness program. The suspensions of two crews were lifted Oct. 31. Terry said all the crews will complete the program within about three months.

The private company employs about 200 firefighters who are on call during the forest fire season.