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First Strike criminal charges dismissed

**Van crash:** Malheur County DA drops charges filed against Roseburg company following accident near Vale

Malheur County District Attorney Dan Norris on Wednesday dropped criminal charges filed against First Strike Environmental following the Aug. 24 crash in which eight firefighters were killed.

The Roseburg company had faced a drunk driving charge and 18 counts of reckless endangerment. First Strike was charged under the state's corporate responsibility law.

"We're ecstatic that it's over," First Strike attorney David Terry said. "It is bittersweet, mostly because of the families. They have been put through tremendous post-traumatic stress because of this incident."

The decision to drop the charges came following two weeks of conversations between Norris, Terry and First Strike President Bob Krueger. Norris also reviewed hundreds of pages of documents provided by First Strike showing the steps the company had taken even before the accident to protect the lives of its employees.

"I was impressed with Bob and his company. It was their clear willingness to come up with ways to protect their people that swayed me," Norris said. "Our goal was always to improve the safety for the men and women who are out there fighting these fires."

The crew was returning home after spending 11 days fighting a major forest fire in Idaho's Boise National Forest when the van they were riding in crossed a double yellow line and crashed into a semitruck west of Vale.

Initial blood tests showed the driver of the van, Mark Ransdell, 23, of Myrtle Creek was drunk, with a blood alcohol level of .13 percent. The company disputed the validity of that test, claiming that blood samples taken from Ransdell's body were mishandled and that the alcohol was produced when the body was burned in the crash.

Subsequent tests from other blood and urine samples taken from Ransdell showed alcohol levels of between .05 percent and .07 percent, below Oregon's legal limit of .08 percent.

Krueger said Wednesday he was happy and relieved to learn of the decision to drop the charges. He said he had contacted the families of each of the men and informed them of the deal and asked for their support.

"At first, I wanted to go to court. I felt we would be vindicated," Krueger said. "But it would have prolonged things and made it that much harder for the families."

The crew bought beer at a gas station before they left Cascade, Idaho, the morning of the crash. The firefighters later stopped at convenience store in Vale, where the crew stopped minutes before the wreck. A videotape from the store showed several crew members buying snacks, pop and beer. Company officials claimed all of the alcohol had been placed in a cooler loaded on top of the van and that none of the beer was consumed during the trip.

In the tape, Ransdell was seen waiting in line and allowing another customer, who wasn't part of the firefighter group, to go ahead of him. He didn't appear to have trouble walking and pulled out his wallet without trouble to show his license to the store clerk while buying a half-case of beer.

Terry said it wasn't the action of someone who was intoxicated. He said there wasn't time between the stop and the crash for him to have become drunk.

Even Norris came to question the evidence.

"Our scientific evidence didn't meet our standards," he said.

Terry criticized Dr. Larry Lewman, the former state medical examiner who still assists the office, for failing to disclose the results of a urine test from October that showed Ransdell was under the legal limit for alcohol. It took a month before those results were shared with attorneys. Had they been provided earlier, it might have changed how the case proceeded, Terry said.

Lewman denied doing anything improper.

"When they requested the information, they got it. Nobody withheld anything," Lewman told The Associated Press.

In exchange for having the charges dropped, First Strike agreed to continue to implement safety improvements within the company and to push for higher standards within the industry. Krueger and other company officials have already spoken to several industry groups on that theme.

"It's gotten everyone's attention in the industry," he said.

First Strike will require each of its firefighters who are authorized to drive company vehicles to complete a three-hour driving course this spring. The company will load one of its vans with gear and have the drivers negotiate a course set up to simulate problems that could be encountered on the road.

Even though a new fire season will soon begin, memories of the last one, where eight young men lost their lives in a tragic accident, will never be far from the minds of the company's employees, he said.

"It's sad and tragic that the guys are gone," Krueger said. "They were the best they could be at that time."

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