



Ex-water company head convicted in workers deaths

BY JAMES GILBERT, SUN STAFF WRITER
Jun 12, 2006, 7:12 pm

A jury on Monday convicted the former president of a Foothills water and sewer company of four of five counts against him stemming from an October 2001 sewer accident that claimed the lives of two workers and injured a third.

After nearly three days of deliberations, the jury of eight women and four men found Brent Weidman guilty on two counts of negligent homicide and two counts of endangerment in the deaths of 26-year-old James Gamble and 62-year-old Gary Lanser, who died after being overcome by toxic gases while working on an underground sewage tank near the second hole of the Mesa Del Sol Golf Course nearly five years ago.

The jury, which returned its decision around 3 p.m., acquitted Weidman of a charge of aggravated assault for former Far West employee Nathan Garret, who survived the incident but suffered lung damage.

Yuma County Superior Court Judge Andrew Gould, who presided over the case, ordered a pre-sentence report be prepared and set a tentative sentencing date for June 29, at 8:30 a.m.

Weidman's attorney Michael Kimmer also informed the court he would probably request a mitigation hearing, but no date was set. Weidman was not taken into custody on Monday and remains out of custody pending his sentencing.

The Arizona Attorney General's Office, which prosecuted the case, contended the accident stemmed from lack of safety equipment and lack of safety training for employees. The defense contended the workers were properly equipped and trained.

Gamble's mother, Carol Borieo, who was not present during the reading of Monday's verdict, said she was happy with the outcome.

"I've waited a long time for this," she said during a phone conversation from her home in Beatty, Nev. "My son died because he (Weidman) didn't care about safety precautions."

Ed Thrasher, Gamble's stepfather, who smiled as the guilty verdicts were read aloud in court, was also pleased with the jury's decision.

"I thought the jury did a good job weighing all the evidence and coming back with the right decision," said Thrasher, who attended every day of the 22-day trial. "It's been a long five years."

Both Borieo and Thrasher added they felt justice had been served and that they hope the jury's decision will help save other lives as well as make companies take safety more seriously.

Jurors, after the verdicts were read, were led from the courtroom by the bailiff through a back door.

Far West, of which Weidman was president during the time of the accident, was found guilty in October of negligent homicide; violating a safety standard causing the death of an employee, Gamble's; and one count of endangerment and one count of aggravated assault.

The water and sewer company also was fined \$1.7 million, ordered to pay more than \$150,000 in restitution to the victims' survivors, sentenced to seven years of probation and ordered to implement a safety program.

Santec, a Far West subcontractor for which Lanser worked, was found guilty of causing his death and was sentenced last year to 24 months of supervised probation and \$30,000 in restitution.

"Maybe this will make sure the people with the big paychecks, fancy titles and perks will realize they can be held responsible," Thrasher said. "It's really shameful when the bottom line is more important than people who work for the company."

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