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Detroit Metro air traffic controllers sue over mold: Contractors blame

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Sept. 15--Air traffic controllers at Detroit Metro Airport are suing several contractors they say botched a mold-removal project at the airport's traffic control tower.

The lawsuit, filed in Wayne County Circuit Court last week, alleges the contractors' cleanup job exposed employees to toxic black mold. The contractors were hired by the Federal Aviation Administration, which employs traffic controllers and is in charge of the tower.

The lawsuit seeks damages in excess of \$25,000. Eight defendants are named in the suit, said Vince Sugent, facility representative for Detroit Tower's National Air Traffic Controllers Association.

It's the latest move by Detroit traffic controllers to call attention to a problem they say has caused them chronic health issues, including asthma, fatigue and respiratory problems. The air traffic controllers previously sued the FAA in connection with the mold, but the cases were thrown out.

Controllers -- who are already held to high health standards -- say the health problems have been so bad that some have been unable to work.

"We're looking to get compensated for injuries," said Sugent, who said he has suffered from asthma, fatigue and joint pain. "We're horrified over long-term health effects that we still don't know about."

Sugent added that the contractors removed the mold improperly and that they didn't inform the FAA that their plans were not up to protocol.

Controllers say the mold, which apparently results from moisture seeping into the building, has been a problem for three years and has made many controllers sick. Mold was discovered at the tower during an inspection by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in 2004.

"We have a long history of working with the union," Cory said. "We've had a lot of testing. Several agencies say it's clean."

Wonder Makers Environmental, an agency hired by the air traffic controllers union, has found mold in the building following mold-removal efforts, Sugent said. Sugent said employees began having health problems after efforts to remove mold began in January 2005. The FAA said it paid MIS Corp. of Saginaw \$25,000 to replace drywall on the fourth and ninth floors of the tower to remove mold.

Prior to that, the FAA attempted to have the mold sprayed, which prompted an evacuation of the tower after controllers complained of nausea, lightheadedness and headaches.

The lawsuit states contractors did not use safety precautions and guidelines to protect controllers during mold-removal efforts.

A representative from Tillotson Environmental Occupational Consulting in St. Johns, one of the companies named in the lawsuit, said he had no comment.

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