LAWSUIT BLAMES SIKORSKY, OTHER CONTRACTORS, FOR DEATH OF SAILORS IN 2014 SEA DRAGON HELICOPTER CRASH

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The widows of three sailors killed in a Navy helicopter crash two years ago off the coast of Virginia are suing the manufacturer, Sikorsky Aircraft Corp., and several other companies that produced components for the MH-53E Sea Dragon.

The lawsuit filed in federal court alleges that Sikorsky and the other defendants, including General Electric, designed and manufactured an unsafe helicopter and failed to warn the military about its risks.

Specifically, the suit criticizes Sikorsky for outfitting the Sea Dragon with brittle wires, known as Kapton wiring, that are prone to sparking fires, and for designing the aircraft with electrical wires running too close to fuel lines.

Lt. Sean Snyder, Lt. Wes Van Dorn and Petty Officer 3rd Class Brian Collins were killed on Jan. 8, 2014, when the Sea Dragon they were flying caught fire and crashed into the ocean, 18 miles off Cape Henry. One of two surviving crew members, Petty Officer 2nd Class Dylan Boone, is also named as a plaintiff.

A Navy investigation determined that a bundle of wires had chafed against a fuel line, releasing an electrical arc that connected with jet fuel and ignited a fire that burned and blinded the pilots, Van

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Dorn and Snyder.

The lawsuit was filed this week in Connecticut, where Sikorsky is based, days before the expiration of the two-year statute of limitations, said New York-based aviation lawyer Frank Fleming.

Under federal law, the Department of Defense cannot be sued for the death or injury of service members, but companies that provide the military with equipment can in some cases be held liable for producing a defective product. Fleming, a former Marine Corps pilot and critic of the Sea Dragon's design, won a settlement from Sikorsky a decade ago for an undisclosed amount of money after an MH-53E crashed in Italy, killing four crew members.

"There are still many unknown aspects of exactly what happened in this particular case, and we will continue to investigate through the discovery process," Fleming said Thursday. "Our essential view is that the contractors that we've sued could have done a better job to detect and correct this particular defect."

Sikorsky spokesman Paul Jackson responded to questions about the lawsuit via email: "We believe this lawsuit has no merit, and we plan to defend against it vigorously."

The problem that caused the 2014 crash wasn't isolated to that aircraft, according to follow-up inspections. Crews spent months afterward repairing and replacing thousands of worn fuel lines and wiring bundles in the military's entire fleet of 28 MH-53E Sea Dragons and 150 CH-53E Super Stallions, the Marine Corps variant.

The Navy's post-crash safety investigation -- a confidential internal report obtained later by The Virginian-Pilot -- identified the helicopter's original design and advanced age as a root cause for the mishap.

The safety report's authors determined that the routing of wires so near a fuel line ran counter to the Navy's own aircraft wiring manual. But because the manual gives blanket priority to original manufacture specifications, and because the suspect wiring matched Sikorsky's 1970s Sea Dragon design drawings, the questionable placement of the wiring bundle near a fuel line went unscrutinized.

This minor design flaw, the report noted, was exacerbated by decades of wear and tear: "While this bundle routing may have posed minimal risk early in the service life of the MH-53E ... it poses a significant risk in an aging airframe," the report said.

Boone, who suffered a head injury and other wounds in the crash before leaving the Navy this year, said he agreed to participate in the lawsuit "to bring much needed attention to a program that fails to adapt or improve, mishap after mishap."

Nicole Van Dorn, widow of Wes Van Dorn, said she hoped the lawsuit would shine a spotlight on a troubled helicopter program.

"Money is unequivocally not a part of my motive for filing the suit," she said. "Our collective motive is to hold all culpable parties accountable, in pursuit of the justice that we do not believe has been served."

The Sea Dragon is the Navy's oldest and most maintenance-intensive aircraft, and is the only U.S. helicopter powerful enough to tow equipment through the sea to find and disarm underwater mines. Plans to retire and replace the helicopter a decade ago fell through, forcing the Navy to

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keep it in service through at least 2025.

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