

Jury deliberates in Citgo Clean Air Act trial

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CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas, June 22 (Reuters) - A Texas jury adjourned on Friday night after little more than an hour of deliberations in the first trial of a refiner charged with violating the U.S. Clean Air Act.

Citgo Petroleum Corp. faces fines in the millions of dollars if convicted of knowingly allowing excess amounts of cancer-causing benzene to be released from its 156,000 barrel-per-day Corpus Christi refinery in 2001 and 2002, a U.S. prosecutor said on Friday in closing arguments.

Since the Clean Air Act was adopted in 1970, other refiners have been charged with criminal violations, but they reached plea agreements with the U.S. government before trial. Citgo is the U.S. refining and marketing subsidiary of Venezuelan state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela S.A.

Howard Stewart, senior environmental crimes litigation counsel for the U.S. Justice Department, said Citgo executives tried to hide their knowledge of the benzene pollution that began at the Corpus Christi refinery in the mid-1990s.

"Citgo didn't want to know," Stewart said. "They didn't want to know and when they knew, they did nothing."

Defense attorney Dick DeGuerin said Citgo operated the refinery within the law and reacted to the excess benzene emissions when officials became aware of them in 2002.

"This is a refinery," DeGuerin told the 12 jurors and two alternates. "Refineries are smelly and dirty."

Although the monetary penalty a federal judge would impose if Citgo is convicted might seem relatively minor given the billions that refiners make, a conviction "could open the door to future lawsuits," said Melissa Jarrell at Texas A&M University at Corpus Christi, who researches environmental crime.

"Texas is a most difficult state to bring lawsuits on behalf of residents around refineries," Jarrell said. "If there's a criminal conviction, it's a huge indication there is a problem."

Jurors will resume deliberations on Monday.