

Citgo jurors try to quit, report progress

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CORPUS CHRISTI — Jurors deliberating in the criminal pollution case against Citgo told the judge Tuesday afternoon that they have made significant progress -- after trying to declare themselves unable to reach a consensus earlier in the day.

Jurors have deliberated since late Friday afternoon in the four-week trial.

District Judge John Rainey sent jurors back to deliberate shortly before noon, after they sought to quit.

They had sent Rainey a note a little past 11 a.m. saying they could not reach a unanimous decision on any of the four counts against Citgo Petroleum Corp. and its subsidiary, Citgo Refining and Chemicals Co. Citgo Refining operates two refineries in Corpus Christi.

Rainey explained to the jury that the case was important and expensive, and that much time had been spent trying it. He ordered the jury go back to the jury room and continue deliberations.

Citgo was indicted in August on two counts of violating the national emissions standards for benzene, a cancer-causing compound involved in processing crude oil, and two counts of operating oil/water separators without roofs, as required by federal regulations, between 1993 and 2004.

The indictment against Citgo also contends that its environmental manager Philip Vrazel failed to identify all the points in the refinery wastewater system where benzene was generated in 2000.

Citgo Refining and Chemicals Co. and Vrazel also face five counts of violating the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in connection with accusations that officials illegally took protected birds that were found coated with oil as a result of landing in the open-top tanks. That trial is scheduled to begin July 9 in federal court.

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