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Illnesses blamed on prison recycling program

(AP) -- When former prison worker Freda Cobb developed sores on her arms, legs and back in 1997, she didn't connect them to an inmate work program that recycles computers and other electronic goods at a penal institution in the Florida Panhandle.

Nor when her hair fell out, when she had abdominal pains, when her weight shot up or when she developed other symptoms.

Now, however, the 49-year-old medically retired guard and cook supervisor at the Marianna Federal Correctional Institution is certain that byproducts of the electronic recycling program are to blame for those ills, as well as her memory loss, temporary blindness, ear pain and migraine headaches. Her uterus was removed after its size tripled.

She and hundreds of other federal prison workers, inmates and others with similar complaints in Florida and six other states say the program -- which has been criticized in a government report for inadequate safety procedures -- exposed them to high levels of heavy metals and other toxic materials.

Cobb says victims inhaled metallic dust that filled the air like pollen and took it home or back to prison dormitories and dining facilities on their clothing. Fans blew the dust throughout buildings that housed the recycling activities. People who came to buy computers at flea market-like sales say they also were exposed.

Cobb didn't suspect the recycling program might be to blame until her mother, Camilla Norris, began having symptoms similar to her own. She, too, had gone there to buy computers, and died in 2006 at 73 of bladder and kidney cancer.

Cobb and another plaintiff have filed a lawsuit aimed at shutting down the Marianna operation as a public nuisance under Florida environmental law.

A federal judge last year dismissed an earlier lawsuit filed on behalf of 26 current and former staffers, including Cobb, as well as inmates.

About 1,000 inmates around the country -- roughly 200 of them at Marianna -- salvage almost 40 million pounds of metals, plastic and other materials annually for Federal Prison Industries, which operates under the trade name UNICOR.

Bureau of Prisons spokeswoman Traci Billingsley wrote in an e-mail that all inmates and staff must wear protective equipment and that UNICOR "is committed to compliance with all applicable health, safety and environmental requirements."

Glass computer monitors and television screens containing lead, cadmium, and beryllium, used to be broken with hammers. Billingsley said that operation was shut down in May

2009 for economic reasons, not safety concerns. Those components now go to a third party for processing.

There are no safe levels for cadmium and beryllium exposure because both cause cancer, said toxicologist Richard Lipsey of Jacksonville. He said lead attacks the central nervous system as well as the kidneys, blood and lower gastrointestinal tract. Some electronic gear also includes mercury, a neurotoxin that "can make you stupid fast," Lipsey said.

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