

Illinois Lawyer Takes on Climate Change, Targeting Companies Allegedly Fueling the Crisis



Melissa "Missy" Sims, a small-town Illinois lawyer, has embarked on a meaningful mission targeting fossil fuel giants and their alleged role in fueling climate change. With the backing of Milberg law firm, Sims is representing 16 municipalities in Puerto Rico seeking damages for the devastating impact of Hurricane Maria and other storms. The lawsuit seeks class-action status and asserts that climate change is intensifying hurricanes, with the defendants, including Exxon Mobil, Chevron Corp., Royal Dutch Shell, and BP, being accused of misrepresenting the dangers of their carbon-based products.

The November 2022 lawsuit brought by Sims stands out for two key reasons, as the New York Times reported. Firstly, it is the first to claim that the fossil fuel companies violated the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO) by falsely marketing their products. Secondly, it is the first to seek damages for a specific weather event, highlighting the unprecedented impact of climate change-related disasters.

Puerto Rico, situated in the hurricane-prone "Hurricane Alley," is considered analogous to an "eggshell plaintiff" in tort law due to its geographical location, making it particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Sims' lawsuit describes the island as facing rising sea levels and warming waters with little defense or warning against the monstrous storms that struck in 2017.

The legal action contends that oil and gas companies established a "Global Climate Coalition" in 1989, which has since engaged in a sustained "marketing campaign of deception" regarding climate change. Alongside RICO allegations, the lawsuit cites other causes of action, including consumer fraud, antitrust violations, fraudulent and negligent misrepresentation, failure to warn, and product liability.

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Notably, Royal Dutch Shell, one of the companies named in the lawsuit, expressed the view that courtrooms are not the appropriate venue to address climate change, advocating instead for smart policy from governments and collective action across all sectors.

At 54 years old, Sims emerges as an unexpected legal figure amidst the global grappling with the devastating impacts of climate change. Described as an observant Catholic from a small Midwest town, Sims' unique background includes an affinity for posting on TikTok, where her dog has amassed a substantial following, a feat that has even outpaced some celebrities.

Sims' journey into law began by assisting communities in prosecuting cases of pet owners failing to clean up after their pets, residents living in unregulated trailers, and landowners neglecting to maintain their properties. Her early successes paved the way for representing the Illinois community of DePue in a lawsuit against Exxon Mobil and others for polluting the land. The village eventually secured a nearly \$1 million settlement. Subsequently, Sims targeted Shell and ConocoPhillips, alleging groundwater pollution in Roxana, Illinois, resulting in almost \$5 million settlements.

Upon joining Milberg, Sims ventured to Puerto Rico to aid local governments in their opioid crisis lawsuits against companies. Witnessing the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Maria, she felt moved by what she describes as the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit, inspiring her to take legal action against the fossil fuel companies.

"I believe the Holy Spirit is my co-counsel," Sims confided to the New York Times. "He's never steered me wrong."

In this unprecedented legal pursuit, Missy Sims' passion and dedication have brought her from humble beginnings to the forefront of the battle against climate change, representing not only the affected communities in Puerto Rico but also a growing global concern for the future of our planet.

Don't be a silent ninja! Let us know your thoughts in the comment section below.