

Engine Troubles

The U.S. government is investigating allegations that General Electric's 7,000 military and commercial jet aircraft engines, including the ones that power President Clinton's plane, may be defective, according to the Justice Department.

The Cleveland Plain Dealer, the newspaper which first divulged the investigation, quoted a civil damage suit filed by a whistle-blowing GE employee as saying the engines "unnecessarily endanger the health and well being of pilots, maintenance service personnel and passengers, including the very real likelihood of loss of life."

The suit added that "Air Force One, the aircraft used most commonly by the President of the United States, is also prone to an electrical system breakdown, engine malfunction or worse because of GE's fraud," the Plain Dealer report said.

The newspaper quoted unnamed federal officials as saying the engines being investigated power some Air Force and Navy jets, including F-14 and F-15 fighters and Stealth and B-1 bombers. Commercial craft equipped with them include models of the European Airbus and the Boeing 747 — of which Air Force One is a version.

The suit alleges that GE failed to conduct adequate testing on whether the engines can be stricken with electro-magnetic interference by everything from microwave radiation to lightning.

GE denies the allegations, saying the engines in question have flown for more than 200 million hours without a "single reported incident" of engine failure linked to the problem alleged in the suit.

Killer Tomatoes

Following the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) approval of Calgene's genetically engineered FLAVR SAVR tomato in mid-May, the Pure Food Campaign announced that it would begin organizing a national boycott of the genetically-altered tomato.

The Pure Food Campaign, which includes consumer, food industry and farm organizations, says it plans to file a federal lawsuit to challenge FDA approval of the Calgene tomato, and the agency's decision to not require labelling of FLAVR SAVR.

The FLAVR SAVR tomato has been genetically engineered to include two novel genes in every one of its cells: an "anti-sense" gene that is designed to retard rotting and a kanamycin resistant gene used as a "marker." Over the last three years, the Pure Food Campaign and numerous consumer, environmental and public health experts have warned that the widespread use of kanamycin resistance in the tomato and other food products could create bacteria resistant to antibiotics, compromising the efficacy of the therapeutic use of kanamycin and the related antibiotic neomycin.

The Campaign is also concerned that the antibiotic resistant gene could transfer to soil bacteria and weedy relatives of the tomato, making weeds more difficult to control.

Suing the Tobacco Lords

MISSISSIPPI'S LANDMARK DECISION to sue the tobacco industry for tax dollars spent on smoking-related illnesses has set off a war of words between the state attorney general and conservative Republican Governor Kirk Fordice.

The governor opposes the suit on principle and predicts the case itself will prove to be a costly and unnecessary use of state resources.

"I have nothing to do with the tobacco lawsuit. Philosophically, I want to throw up when I think of all the lawsuits going on in this country," he says. "I'm not an enthusiast of going out and suing people."

"I would think that our governor would be more sympathetic to those indigent Mississippians who are dying from lung cancer and heart disease," says Democratic Attorney General Mike Moore, who filed the suit.

But he says that his office does not need support from the governor's office to pursue the case, adding, "we won't let his criticisms slow our efforts."

Moore, backed by State Health Officer Dr. Ed Thompson, filed the groundbreaking lawsuit in May against 13 tobacco companies, seeking reimbursement for the estimated tens of millions of dollars it must spend each year to provide medical care to victims of tobacco-related illness.

"Tobacco kills too many of our people and causes too many others to be sick every year. We all pay," says Thompson.

"Since tobacco companies continue to push their addictive products [on] Mississippians, they should be willing to pay the costs of medical care; they need to pay for the heart disease, cancer and other lung diseases tobacco causes," Thompson says. "We need to use Mississippi's limited resources to prevent diseases and promote individual behaviors that enable people to avoid being sick."

The annual U.S. death toll from tobacco use is 419,000. Even though smokers die younger than non-smokers, over the course of their lives, current and former smokers generate an estimated \$501 billion in excess health care costs, according to the American Cancer Society.

"This lawsuit is premised on a simple notion — you cause the health crisis, you pay for it," Moore says. "The free ride is over. It's time these billionaire tobacco companies start paying what they rightfully owe Mississippi taxpayers. It's time they quit hooking our young people on nicotine delivered through the dirty needle of cigarettes and other tobacco products. It's time justice prevailed."

The lawsuit was filed in Chancery Court in Jackson County, Mississippi. It seeks damages from the defendants to reimburse the state for providing health care to tobacco victims through programs such as the state insurance plan, Medicaid, medical assistance for the aged and indigent care. It also seeks punitive damages, and other damages, including legal and court costs. The suit further requests that the tobacco companies be ordered to stop hawking their products to Mississippi youth through promotional gimmicks such as "Joe Camel."

— Ben Lilliston