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A U.S. District Court judge in Hartford has ordered Northeast Utilities to pay 15 retired employees each \$100,000 or more because company officials misled them about special retirement packages.

Maria Garriga , Register Staff

The plaintiffs filed the lawsuit in 1996. Judge Dominic Squatrito made his decision March 31 and released it to the public Friday.

The amount NU owes could add up to more than \$1.5 million, including back benefits, said attorney Tom Moukawsher, a principal in Moukawsher & Walsh LLC in Hartford, the law firm representing the employees.

"There were specific instances where the company officers lied," Moukawsher said.

Berlin, Conn.-based Northeast Utilities is New England's largest utility. Its holdings include Connecticut Light & Power, Yankee Energy, Public Service of New Hampshire, and Western Massachusetts Electric Co.

NU had been planning special retirement packages with financial incentives in 1991, 1993 and 1994, but withheld that information and in some cases denied it to some employees, the judge ruled.

The plaintiffs would have stayed at NU past their scheduled retirement dates if they had known about the upcoming retirement incentives, Squatrito said.

NU spokesman Al Lara said the company is reviewing its options, including an appeal.

"Northeast Utilities appreciates the importance of information to our employees considering retirement," Lara said.

Squatrito said Northeast Utilities had failed in its fiduciary responsibility because it denied and withheld information.

"When there is evidence that NU saw the offering of an early retirement program as a company goal, as evidenced by the efforts of its staff to research, prepare for and implement such a program, then NU's fiduciary duty is implicated," Squatrito wrote in his decision.

He ruled that NU had a duty to inform the plaintiffs of the status of deliberations about the special retirement programs, especially after the plaintiffs had asked questions.

Retired NU employee Armand Normandy, 67, formerly of Meriden, said Friday he

asked company officials about a special retirement package. He was specifically told there would be none offered in the future, he said, and he missed the early retirement program by one month.

Normandy retired in 1991 to the Cape Cod town of Eastham in Massachusetts.

The retirement package would have added nearly \$1,000 a month to his monthly retirement income, he said.

"Whatever happened to fair play? It didn't happen when I retired," Normandy said.

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