

2005

# Mark R. Williams v. Atlas Turner, et al., : Reply Brief

Utah Court of Appeals

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S. Brook Millard; Courtney G. Broaden; Brayton, Purcell, Eisenberg, Gilchrist and Morton.

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**IN THE SUPREME COURT OF UTAH**

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**MARK R. WILLIAMS,**

Plaintiff/Appellant,

**v.**

**ATLAS TURNER, et al.,**

Defendants/Appellee.

**REPLY BRIEF OF THE APPELLANT**

Supreme Court Case No.: 20050817-SC

Civil No.: 020904578 AS

Master Case No. 010900863 AS

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APPEAL FROM A FINAL JUDGEMENT OF THE  
THIRD JUDICIAL DISTRICT COURT OF  
SALT LAKE COUNTY, STATE OF UTAH  
JUDGE GLENN K. IWASAKI

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SEE FOLLOWING PAGE FOR  
DEFENDANT PARTIES

S. BROOK MILLARD (#7415)  
COURTNEY G. BROADEN (#10913)  
**BRAYTON ❖ PURCELL  
EISENBERG, GILCHRIST &  
MORTON**  
215 South State Street, Suite 900  
Salt Lake City, Utah 84111  
Telephone: (801) 366-9100

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MORTON**  
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Salt Lake City, Utah 84111  
Telephone: (801) 366-9100

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**OTHER APPEALS CONSOLIDATED WITH 20050817-SC**

20050818-CA

20050820-CA

20050831-CA

20050841-CA

20050848-CA

20050864-CA

**PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDINGS**

AQUA-CHEM, INC.  
(CLEAVER-BROOKS)

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GENERAL ELECTRIC

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COMPANY

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THERMAL WEST INDUSTRIAL, INC.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Plaintiffs and Appellants Robert R. Williams, et al. (“plaintiffs”) submit this brief in reply to the joint Appellees’ Brief of the asbestos defendants (“defendants”). Defendants’ arguments should be rejected, and the summary judgment dismissing plaintiffs’ claims should be reversed, because the conduct of plaintiffs’ pulmonary expert (Dr. Alvin Schonfeld), and of plaintiffs’ attorneys, was based on a valid, reasonable, and good faith interpretation of the law, and did not violate public policy. Dr. Schonfeld was professionally qualified to evaluate each of the plaintiffs to determine if they had an asbestos-related disease and the extent of their illness, and his testimony was sufficient to raise triable issues of fact. Contrary to defendants’ contentions, plaintiffs complied with the applicable procedures for requesting reconsideration, and they were entitled to relief from the district court’s adverse decision.

## II. ARGUMENT

### A. Defendants’ Policy Arguments Are Irrelevant And Based On Erroneous Facts

Appellees’ Brief is based in significant part on the spurious policy argument that Dr. Schonfeld’s evaluations violated public policy because he “conducted examinations and rendered diagnoses for the sole purpose of generating asbestos litigation claims.” (*E.g.*, Appellees’ Brief at 1). Defendants devote several pages of their brief to a description of the “asbestos litigation crisis,” with the implication that a medical professional who devotes time to assisting individuals who believe they have been injured by exposure to asbestos is somehow at fault for creating or contributing to that crisis.

Defendants’ mantra that plaintiffs’ counsel hired Dr. Schonfeld “for the sole purpose of generating asbestos litigation claims” (*e.g.*, Appellees’ Brief at 1, 3, 16, 31) is also factually



untrue. As Appellants have illustrated to the district court and in their Opening Brief in the Court of Appeals, virtually all of the cases consolidated herein were filed months in *advance* of the time that plaintiffs retained Dr. Schonfeld. Plaintiffs' Memorandum in Opposition to Summary Judgment (R 671-737) demonstrates that, "the dates of Dr. Schonfeld examinations and reports in all but two (2) cases, were completed after the filing dates of the lawsuits. A simple comparison of these two dates proves this point." (Memo. at 5-6 [R.675-676]; *see also* RT 6/6/05 pp. 9-10, 48.) The Memorandum also includes a chart setting forth those relevant dates. *Id.* In its Memorandum Decision filed January 28, 2005, the district court recognized that plaintiffs' claims were *not* filed on the basis of Dr. Schonfeld's opinions. It stated:

Indeed, argue Plaintiffs, Dr. Schonfeld has been named by Plaintiffs as an expert witness in each of the thirty (30) cases listed by Defendants and in all but two (2) cases, Dr. Schonfeld's examinations and reports were completed after the filing dates of the lawsuit.

(Memo Decision at 2-3 [R.828-829].) Since each of the plaintiffs already had a good faith belief and, impliedly, medical evidence, that they had an asbestos-related condition for which they were entitled to compensation, it is hardly surprising that Dr. Schonfeld in most cases confirmed that they had asbestos disease. The hiring of an expert to evaluate and, if appropriate, opine about the medical condition of a plaintiff who has previously filed a lawsuit alleging that he has been injured by asbestos does not amount to the sort of ambulance-chasing which defendants imply occurred here.

If anyone is to blame for the "explosion" in asbestos claims, it is, rather, the companies who, like defendants, continued aggressively to manufacture and market asbestos-containing products for decades after the lethal effects of exposure were known. As one eminent speaker

asserted in his argument against the recently-defeated federal asbestos legislation proposal, it makes no sense that “what for one person would be deemed a tragedy, suddenly is called a ‘litigation crisis’ when it affects thousands of people.” In any case, defendants’ views about the litigation process are utterly irrelevant to these proceedings. If the Court finds that plaintiffs’ claims have merit, it is obligated to allow them to proceed regardless of whether or not it thinks there is “too much” asbestos litigation.

**B. Dr. Schonfeld’s Evaluations Violated Neither The Letter Nor The Spirit Of The Medical Practices Act**

The issue presented by this case is not whether the State of Utah has the right to regulate the practice of medicine by imposing reasonable licensing requirements, but whether (assuming for purposes of argument only that the Court finds that Dr. Schonfeld’s evaluations violated those requirements), his expert opinions should have been excluded and ignored in ruling on the merits of defendants’ motion for summary judgment. The district court clearly erred in ignoring these evaluations, and thus was also incorrect in its ultimate conclusion.

The Medical Practices Act is designed to “prevent[] the unauthorized, fraudulent, and incompetent practice of medicine.... The explicit legislative intent of the ... Act is to protect the public from those unqualified and untrained who, in conducting a business, purport to diagnose and treat human ailments and diseases for compensation.” *State v. Hoffman*, 733 P.2d 502, 504 (Ut.App. 1987). Dr. Schonfeld’s conduct does not fall within any of those proscriptions. Neither defendants nor the district court questioned the doctor’s credentials to evaluate the plaintiffs, or the techniques which he used for that purpose. Dr. Schonfeld is eminently qualified and highly trained in his profession, and there is no evidence that he has ever been subject to any type of

disciplinary proceeding, in Utah or elsewhere. There was simply no factual basis for the district court's conclusion that his testimony was "unreliable."

Defendants' interpretation of the statutory exemptions for the giving of expert testimony (UCA § 58-67-305(8) and §58-68-305(8)) is so narrow as to read the exemption out of existence; they argue that the statute "contemplates allowing a person to hold himself out as a physician while testifying as an expert witness during the course of a legal proceeding, ..., nothing more." (Appellees' Brief at 23.) However, an expert must always do more than that; s/he must review medical records, occupational histories, radiographic evidence, testimony, etc. in order to determine the extent and potential causes(s) of the plaintiff's injuries, and to form a diagnostic opinion. Otherwise, the supposed expert's testimony is meaningless. Therefore, the issue is whether any of such foundational information may, or may not, be supplied directly by the client, in the form of an interview and routine, non-invasive procedures.<sup>1</sup> The parties agree that this question has not previously been addressed by the courts of Utah.

The primary authority cited by defendants in support of their assertion that the lack of a Utah medical license rendered Dr. Schonfeld's testimony unreliable are two unpublished memorandum decisions from trial courts in the States of Washington and Texas. (*See* Appellees' Brief at 28-29, 32 and notes 16, 17.) Those rulings, which would have no precedential value even in the jurisdictions in which they were issued, should not be considered here because (1)

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Schonfeld did not offer any treatment and did not give the plaintiffs medical advice. His reports and the generalized recommendations in them were, rather, sent to plaintiffs' counsel for use in the litigation. Having been retained to form an opinion, it was entirely appropriate for the doctor (in his role as a testifying expert), to share that opinion with his clients.

unreported trial level decisions are not properly citable (*see* Utah Rule Appellate Procedure 30(f)<sup>2</sup>), and (2) defendants have failed to show that the substantive law of Washington and Texas is sufficiently similar to Utah law to satisfy the threshold level of relevance. Further, a reading of the decisions shows that they do little to support defendants' position.

The perfunctory decision of the trial judge in Washington does not reveal what the doctor did, and there, the court found that the report was unreliable, at least in part, because it was based on "nonconforming x-rays" taken by unregistered radiology technicians using unregistered and uncertified equipment. Further, the Texas decision relates to a completely different set of circumstances as are present here. The facts of that case actually bolster the Appellants' argument when compared with the instant matters. The judge in Texas found that about a dozen doctors and support staff had perfunctorily "screened" some 10,000 plaintiffs for silicosis by posing questions and following procedures created by plaintiffs' attorneys. Several of the doctors testified, in contradiction to the written reports on which plaintiffs based their claims, that they did not in fact undertake to "diagnose" the plaintiffs with silicosis or any other disease. (*See, e.g.*, Texas Opinion at 46.) The court found that many of the technicians who interviewed the plaintiffs and administered their x-rays and pulmonary function tests had "no medical training" and were unsupervised by any medical professional, and that at least one of the screening firms had previously been cited for non-compliance with state standards. (*Id.* at 63, 69, 71.) Moreover, in some cases, the agreement was that the medical evaluators would not be paid unless the clients subsequently decided to hire the lawyers who arranged for the screening. (*Id.* at

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<sup>2</sup> None of the plaintiffs nor their counsel were involved in the cited cases.

74-75.) Notably, the court expressly stated that the issue of the effect of some of the providers' lack of a license to practice in the state where the evaluations were performed *was not before the court*. (*Id.* at 92 n.80, 98 n.85.)

It is hardly surprising that in those very disparate cases, the court found the "expert reports" unreliable. Conversely, in this case, there is no evidence that Dr. Schonfeld's procedures suffered from any irregularities which might render his opinions unreliable from a medical or scientific viewpoint. The district court was, accordingly, obliged to consider them in determining whether plaintiffs met their burden of demonstrating an issue of fact sufficient to defeat summary judgment.

**C. Plaintiffs' Motion To Amend And Reconsider The Judgment Was Properly Filed**

Regardless of how the Court rules on the admissibility issue, summary judgment should be reversed because it was an abuse of discretion for the trial court to deny plaintiffs' motion for reconsideration so that they could designate new experts and submit supplemental affidavits in opposition to summary judgment.<sup>3</sup> Defendants' assertion that plaintiffs' request for such relief was procedurally improper is based primarily on the Utah Supreme Court's recent decision in *Gillett v. Price*, 2006 UT 24, 135 P.3d 861 ("*Gillett*"), and on plaintiffs' alleged failure to comply with the procedural requirements for a motion for continuance under Rule 56(f). Neither of those contentions has merit.

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike the plaintiffs in the related *Allred* appeal, #20050829-SC, the initially scheduled dates for the plaintiffs herein to designate expert witnesses had not yet passed at the time the motion for summary judgment was heard. Thus, there was no need for the trial court to do anything more than permit the *Williams* plaintiffs more time to obtain and submit replacement affidavits in order to preserve their right to recover in this case.

Following the initial hearing of this matter, plaintiffs moved the district court, “pursuant to Rule 59(e),” “to amend its judgment and reconsider its Memorandum Decision of January 28, 2005.” The court’s decision reflects that it understood the procedural basis of the motion. In its Memorandum Decision of June 13, 2005, the court declared the motion timely, stating that, “pursuant to Rule 59(e), a motion to alter or amend judgment ‘shall be served no later than 10 days after the entry of judgment.’ To date, judgment has not been entered, accordingly, timeliness is not an issue.” R 9231. The court appropriately proceeded to reconsider the merits of its prior ruling, although it reaffirmed its decision that defendants should prevail.

There is no legitimate basis for appellees to challenge the court’s agreement to hear plaintiffs’ motion. In *Gillett*, the Supreme Court acknowledged that motions to reconsider have been liberally allowed by the courts, stating that “a long line of cases from both the court of appeals and this court [have treated] motions to reconsider as rule-sanctioned motions based on the substance of the motion [citations].” (§ 8.) The Court held “that it is time this practice comes to an end,” but its holding is limited to post-final-judgment motions; “it does not affect motions to or decisions by the district courts to reconsider or revise nonfinal judgments, which have no impact on the time to appeal and are sanctioned by our rules.” (§ 10.) Further, *Gillett* cannot be retroactively applied to preclude motions, such as plaintiffs’, which were procedurally proper at the time they were filed. Defendants’ insistence that plaintiffs’ motion should have been rejected “based on the Utah Supreme Court’s recent and unequivocal rejection of this practice [of moving for reconsideration following the issuance of a memorandum decision granting summary judgment] in *Gillett*” (Appellees’ Brief at 36), is entirely misguided.

Regardless of how the courts choose to handle such motions in the future, at the time relevant to the instant cases, there was significant precedent approving the filing of a motion to reconsider a decision granting or denying a motion for summary judgment, no matter how the motion was denominated. *See, e.g., Timm v. Dewsnup*, 921 P.2d 1381 (Utah 1996); *U.P.C., Inc. v. R.O.A. General, Inc.*, 990 P.2d 945 (Ut.App. 1999); *Trembly v. Mrs. Fields Cookies*, 884 P.2d 1306 (Ut.App. 1994). Among the courts' grounds for such reconsideration was a determination that amendment of the decision was necessary to prevent "manifest injustice." As summarized in *Trembly*,

A court can consider several factors in determining the propriety of reconsidering a prior ruling. These may include, but are not limited to, when (1) the matter is presented in a "different light" or under "different circumstances;" (2) there has been a change in the governing law; (3) a party offers new evidence; (4) "manifest injustice" will result if the court does not reconsider the prior ruling; (5) a court needs to correct its own errors; or (6) an issue was inadequately briefed when first contemplated by the court.

884 P.2d at 1311. *See also State v. Parsons*, 781 P.2d 1275, 1282 (Ut.App. 1989) (discussing the trial court's "inherent powers as the authority in charge of the trial" and its "broad latitude to control and manage the proceedings" and preserve the integrity thereof); Civil Procedure Rule 60(b) (authorizing the Court "on motion and upon such terms as are just," to relieve a party from the effect of a judgment or order for mistake, inadvertence, surprise, or "any other reason justifying relief.")

In the *Trembly* case, a defendant who was only partially successful on its motion for summary judgment twice asked the court to reconsider its ruling, basing its request on Utah Rule of Civil Procedure 60(b)(7) on one occasion. The Court of Appeals held that Rule 60(b)(7) was

inapplicable, but that Rule 54(b) did provide a basis for relief, and it affirmed on that basis.<sup>4</sup> The Court characterized Rule 54(b) as “allow[ing] a court to change its position with respect to any order or decision before a final judgment has been rendered [citation],” and further held that, “Because the substance, not caption, of a motion is dispositive in determining the character of the motion, [citation], we will treat Mrs. Field’s motion as a Rule 54(b) motion.” *Id.* at 1310. Rules 54(b) and 60(b) provide alternative legal bases for plaintiffs’ motion here, as well.

Similarly, in *Ron Shepherd Insurance Inc. v. Shields*, 882 P.2d 650 (Utah 1994), the Supreme Court noted that it had always held that “motions for reconsideration” will be entertained if they are permissible under any rule, and held that the trial court properly entertained further legal argument, and considered supplemental affidavits, which were submitted in the form of a motion for reconsideration. 882 P.2d at 653 n.4. The Court found that plaintiffs’ motion “was, in essence, not a motion for reconsideration at all, but simply a reargument of their opposition to defendants’ motion for summary judgment, *which a trial court is free to entertain at any point prior to entry of a final order or judgment.*” *Id.* (emphasis added). See also *Brookside Mobile Home Park, Ltd. v. Peebles*, 48 P.3d 968, 973 (Utah 2002) (Holding that it was appropriate for the trial court to reconsider summary judgment on the basis of the opposing party’s new legal argument and supplemental affidavits which “clarified” its position, and that, “Trial courts have clear discretion to reconsider and change their position with

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<sup>4</sup> “Rule 54(b) of the Utah Rules of Civil Procedure provides, in pertinent part, that any order or other form of decision, however designated, which adjudicates fewer than all the claims or the rights and liabilities of fewer than all the parties ... is subject to revision at any time before the entry of judgment adjudicating all the claims and the rights and liabilities of all the parties.” *Trembly*, 884 P.2d at 1310-11.



respect to any orders or decisions as long as no final judgment has been rendered.”); *J.V. Hatch Const., Inc. v. Kampros*, 971 P.2d 8, 11 (Ut.App. 1998) (Agreeing that no such thing as a “motion for reconsideration” on the basis of an erroneous application of the law exists, but holding that “a motion so titled may still be properly heard if it could have been brought under a different rule, ... but was improperly characterized.”)

Defendants instead characterize plaintiffs’ motion as a request for a continuance under Rule 56(f). The cases they cite are inapposite not only on procedural grounds, but also on the facts, for in each of them the alleged need for additional discovery was either raised for the first time on appeal, *see, e.g., Jackson v. Layton City*, 743 P.2d 1196, 1198 (Utah 1987), or the advantages to granting the appellants more time was unclear. For example, in *In re Sonnenreich*, 2004 UT 3, 86 P.3d 712, the Court affirmed summary judgment for the plaintiff in a State Bar disciplinary proceeding on the ground that the Office of Professional Conduct had failed to come forth with any evidence to rebut plaintiff’s sworn assertion that she had never received notice of the disciplinary action against her. The decision was based on the familiar rule that a party opposing summary judgment is obligated to come forward with evidence to show that it is entitled to proceed to trial, and that “it is not enough to rest on allegations alone.” 86 P.3d at 725. Similarly, in *Fenn v. Redmond Venture, Inc.*, 2004 Ut.App. 355, 101 P.3d 387, the Court affirmed summary judgment because the speculative evidence in plaintiffs’ affidavits, *even if true*, was demonstrably insufficient to raise a triable issue of fact. The Court also held that plaintiffs’ motion to alter or amend the judgment and for additional discovery under Rule 56(f) was properly denied because the motion was untimely, and plaintiffs offered no *explanation* for why additional discovery was necessary, or as to what they hoped to prove. Finally, in *Grynberg*

*v. Questar Pipeline Co.*, 2003 UT 8, 70 P.3d 1, a defendant in a breach of contract/misrepresentation case moved to dismiss plaintiff's claims, and the court treated the motion as one for summary judgment. Although plaintiffs did not file a Rule 56(f) motion, the Court of Appeals considered whether they were entitled to such relief. The Court found, to the extent the issue had been addressed in plaintiffs' briefs, that:

we agree with the district court that they "have failed to demonstrate how additional discovery would be of any assistance to their response to defendants" motion. Simply asserting that more discovery is needed and that a proper response to the motion for summary judgment is impossible due to the other party's failure to cooperate with discovery requests is inadequate to overcome summary judgment. [citation] Parties must "offer more than conclusory assertions to demonstrate the existence of a genuine issue for trial," and cannot justify further discovery without providing a viable theory as to the nature of the facts they wish to obtain. [citation]

70 P.3d at 15. *See also Franklin v. Stevenson*, 1999 UT 61, 987 P.2d 22, 25, in which the Court found that, because plaintiff's case rested entirely on the then-novel theory of "recovered memory," there was no indication that plaintiff could produce new admissible evidence in response to the court's exclusionary ruling.

The situation here is patently distinguishable from these cases. It is undisputed that Dr. Schonfeld's expert reports, if admitted, were more than sufficient to defeat summary judgment and entitle plaintiffs to proceed to trial. It was also perfectly clear to the district court and to opposing parties what additional evidence (i.e. replacement expert medical reports) plaintiffs required, how and why that need arose, and that, given additional time, plaintiffs could almost certainly provide the evidence needed to establish the facts of their asbestos-related injuries, and

to defeat summary judgment. Under these circumstances, it was an abuse of discretion for the district court to deny the relief sought in plaintiffs' motion to reconsider.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

The district court's dismissal of the claims of dozens of plaintiffs at issue is premised on two unprecedented interpretations of the Medical Practices Act: first, that the Act precludes an out-of-state expert like Dr. Schonfeld from obtaining from his clients the basic foundational evidence needed to prepare his opinions; and second, that the Act includes an exclusionary rule which requires the court to completely disregard the reports of an otherwise-qualified expert who violates the Act in adjudicating the merits of a motion for summary judgment. For the reasons stated in their Opening Brief, Appellants submit that the court's construction of the Act is overly restrictive, especially as applied to this case.

Regardless of how this Court resolves this legal issue, however, it should at a minimum hold that the district court's refusal to allow plaintiffs additional time to designate new experts licensed in Utah, and to modify its summary judgment on reconsideration, was an abuse of discretion. In the face of Dr. Schonfeld's expert opinion that each of the plaintiffs in fact suffers from an asbestos-related disease, it cannot be determined as a matter of law that plaintiffs cannot prove their claims. Consequently, Appellants must be permitted the opportunity to present their claims to a jury.

Dated: July 3rd, 2006

Respectfully submitted,

BRAYTON❖PURCELL LLP  
EISENBERG, GILCHRIST & MORTON

By:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "S. Brook Millard", written over a horizontal line.

S. Brook Millard

Courtney G. Broaden

Attorneys for Plaintiffs/Appellants

## CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

This is to certify that on this 27<sup>th</sup> day of July, 2006, a true and correct copy of the foregoing pleading was served via U.S. first class mail, postage prepaid to the following:

UNION CARBIDE CHEMICALS AND PLASTICS COMPANY, INC.	BAKER & HOSTELLER, LLP Mary Price <a href="mailto:Mbirk@baker-hostetler.com">Mbirk@baker-hostetler.com</a> Ronald L. Hellbusch <a href="mailto:Rhellbusch@bakerlaw.com">Rhellbusch@bakerlaw.com</a> 303 East 17th Ave. Suite 1100 Denver, Colorado 80203
UNION CARBIDE CORPORATION	BAKER & HOSTELLER, LLP Mary Price <a href="mailto:Mbirk@baker-hostetler.com">Mbirk@baker-hostetler.com</a> Ronald L. Hellbusch <a href="mailto:Rhellbusch@bakerlaw.com">Rhellbusch@bakerlaw.com</a> 303 East 17th Ave. Suite 1100 Denver, Colorado 80203
CERTAINTED CORPORATION	BAKER & HOSTELLER, LLP Mary Price <a href="mailto:Mbirk@baker-hostetler.com">Mbirk@baker-hostetler.com</a> Ronald L. Hellbusch <a href="mailto:Rhellbusch@bakerlaw.com">Rhellbusch@bakerlaw.com</a> 303 East 17th Ave. Suite 1100 Denver, Colorado 80203 PARR, WADDOUPS, BROWN, GEE & LOVELESS Patricia W. Christensen <a href="mailto:pwd@pwlaw.com">pwd@pwlaw.com</a> 185 South State Street, Suite 1300 Salt Lake City, UT 84111-1537
DANA CORPORATION	BAKER & HOSTELLER, LLP Mary Price <a href="mailto:Mbirk@baker-hostetler.com">Mbirk@baker-hostetler.com</a> Ronald L. Hellbusch <a href="mailto:Rhellbusch@bakerlaw.com">Rhellbusch@bakerlaw.com</a> 303 East 17th Ave. Suite 1100 Denver, Colorado 80203 PARR, WADDOUPS, BROWN, GEE & LOVELESS Patricia W. Christensen <a href="mailto:pwd@pwlaw.com">pwd@pwlaw.com</a> 185 South State Street, Suite 1300 Salt Lake City, UT 84111-1537
MAREMONT CORPORATION	BAKER & HOSTELLER, LLP Mary Price <a href="mailto:Mbirk@baker-hostetler.com">Mbirk@baker-hostetler.com</a> Ronald L. Hellbusch <a href="mailto:Rhellbusch@bakerlaw.com">Rhellbusch@bakerlaw.com</a> 303 East 17th Ave. Suite 1100 Denver, Colorado 80203 PARR, WADDOUPS, BROWN, GEE & LOVELESS Patricia W. Christensen <a href="mailto:pwd@pwlaw.com">pwd@pwlaw.com</a> 185 South State Street, Suite 1300 Salt Lake City, UT 84111-1537
PNEUMO ABEX CORPORATION	BAKER & HOSTELLER, LLP Mary Price <a href="mailto:Mbirk@baker-hostetler.com">Mbirk@baker-hostetler.com</a> Ronald L. Hellbusch <a href="mailto:Rhellbusch@bakerlaw.com">Rhellbusch@bakerlaw.com</a> 303 East 17th Ave. Suite 1100 Denver, Colorado 80203

	PARR, WADDOUPS, BROWN, GEE & LOVELESS Patricia W. Christensen <a href="mailto:pw@pwlaw.com">pw@pwlaw.com</a> 185 South State Street, Suite 1300 Salt Lake City, UT 84111-1537
HONEYWELL INTERNATIONAL, INC.	BALLARD SPAHR ANDREWS & INGERSOLL <a href="mailto:asbestos@ballardspahr.com">asbestos@ballardspahr.com</a> David B. Watkins Matthew L. Moncur Anthony C. Kaye 201 South Main Street, Suite 600 Salt Lake City, UT 84111-2221
AGCO CORPORATION	BARBARA L. MAW, P.C. Barbara L. Maw <a href="mailto:Bmaw@fre700.com">Bmaw@fre700.com</a> cc: Tobie <a href="mailto:office@fre700.com">office@fre700.com</a> 185 South State Street, Suite 340 Salt Lake City, UT 84111
CSK AUTO, INC.	BARBARA L. MAW, P.C. Barbara L. Maw <a href="mailto:Bmaw@fre700.com">Bmaw@fre700.com</a> cc: Tobie <a href="mailto:office@fre700.com">office@fre700.com</a> 185 South State Street, Suite 340 Salt Lake City, UT 84111
BRIDGESTONE/FIRESTONE, INC. - Hold for Specific ID	BECHERER, KANNETT & SCHWEITZER M. Kannett <a href="mailto:mkannett@bksca.com">mkannett@bksca.com</a> 2200 Powell Street, Suite 805 Emeryville, CA 94608
INGERSOLL-RAND COMPANY	BERMAN & SAVAGE <a href="mailto:asbestos@bermansavage.com">asbestos@bermansavage.com</a> E. Scott Savage Casey K. McGarvey 170 South Main Street, Suite 500 Salt Lake City, UT 84101
UNION PACIFIC RAILROAD COMPANY	BERMAN & SAVAGE <a href="mailto:asbestos@bermansavage.com">asbestos@bermansavage.com</a> E. Scott Savage Casey K. McGarvey 170 South Main Street, Suite 500 Salt Lake City, UT 84101
ANDERSON LUMBER CO.	BERRETT & ASSOCIATES, L.C. Barbara K. Berrett <a href="mailto:Bberrett@berrettandassoc.com">Bberrett@berrettandassoc.com</a> cc: <a href="mailto:Nwright@berrettandassoc.com">Nwright@berrettandassoc.com</a> 50 S. Main Street #530 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
PARKER-HANNIFIN CORPORATION STANDARD MOTOR PRODUCTS, INC.	BERRETT & ASSOCIATES, L.C. Barbara K. Berrett <a href="mailto:Bberrett@berrettandassoc.com">Bberrett@berrettandassoc.com</a> cc: <a href="mailto:Nwright@berrettandassoc.com">Nwright@berrettandassoc.com</a> 50 S. Main Street #530 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
STANDARD MOTOR PRODUCTS, INC.	BERRETT & ASSOCIATES, L.C. Barbara K. Berrett <a href="mailto:Bberrett@berrettandassoc.com">Bberrett@berrettandassoc.com</a> cc: <a href="mailto:Nwright@berrettandassoc.com">Nwright@berrettandassoc.com</a> 50 S. Main Street #530 Salt Lake City, UT 84144

PAGE BRAKE COMPANY INCORPORATED	BURBIDGE & WHITE Thomas C. Anderson <a href="mailto:tanderson@burbidgewhite.com">tanderson@burbidgewhite.com</a> 50 South Main Street, Suite 1400 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
DEERE & COMPANY	CALISTER, NEBEKER & McCULLOUGH Martin Denney <a href="mailto:mrdenney@cnmlaw.com">mrdenney@cnmlaw.com</a> Gateway Tower East, Suite 900 10 East South Temple Salt Lake City, UT 84133
GREFCO, INC	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Dale J. Lambert Rebecca L. Hill 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
NATIONAL DYNAMICS CORPORATION	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Dale J. Lambert Rebecca L. Hill 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
GOODYEAR TIRE & RUBBER COMPANY THE	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Dale J. Lambert 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
ARNOLD MACHINERY	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Geoffrey C. Haslam Rebecca L. Hill 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
SUTHERLAND BLDG. MATERIAL SHOPPING CENTERS, INC.	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Geoffrey C. Haslam Scot A. Boyd 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
DAIMLERCHRYSLER CORPORATION	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Nathan D. Alder Scot A. Boyd 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
DURAMETALLIC CORPORATION (division of Flowserve)	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Phillip S. Ferguson Rebecca Hill 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
ELLIOTT COMPANY	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a>

	Phillip S. Ferguson Rebecca Hill 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
GENERAL REFRACTORIES COMPANY	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Phillip S. Ferguson Rebecca Hill 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
SIX STATES DISTRIBUTORS, INC.	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Phillip S. Ferguson Rebecca Hill 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
STANDARD BUILDERS SUPPLY CO.	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Phillip S. Ferguson Rebecca Hill 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
TAMKO ROOFING PRODUCTS, INC.	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Phillip S. Ferguson Rebecca Hill 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
UNION BOILERS	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Phillip S. Ferguson Rebecca Hill 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
WESTPOINT STEVENS, INC.	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Phillip S. Ferguson Rebecca Hill 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
CLAYTON INDUSTRIES	CHRISTENSEN & JENSEN <a href="mailto:asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com">asbestosgroups@chrisjen.com</a> Phillip S. Ferguson Rebecca Hill 50 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84144
ECONOMY BUILDERS SUPPLY INC.	Counsel Unknown
MOUNTAIN LAND SUPPLY COMPANY	JAUSSE & CHRISTIANSEN Clari J. Jausse Randl J. Christiansen <a href="mailto:Randy@jaussi-christiansen.com">Randy@jaussi-christiansen.com</a> 350 East Center Street, Suite 2 Provo, UT 84603



MOUNTAIN STATES INSULATION & SUPPLY CO., INC.	John M. Sharp 371 East 25th Street Idaho Falls, ID 83404 Telephone: (801) 522-7122
AUTOZONE, INC.	JONES WALDO HOLBROOK, & MCDONOUGH PC Bret M. Hanna <a href="mailto:Bhanna@joneswaldo.com">Bhanna@joneswaldo.com</a> 170 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1644
FOSTER WHEELER CORPORATION	JONES, WALDO, HOLBROOK & McDONOUGH Mark J. Williams <a href="mailto:mwilliams@joneswaldo.com">mwilliams@joneswaldo.com</a> 170 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1644
AMERICAN BILTRITE, INC.	JONES, WALDO, HOLBROOK & MCDONOUGH Ross I. Romero <a href="mailto:Rromero@joneswaldo.com">Rromero@joneswaldo.com</a> Dennis H. Markusson <a href="mailto:Markusson@mgjlaw.com">Markusson@mgjlaw.com</a> William B. Stanton <a href="mailto:Stanton@mgjlaw.com">Stanton@mgjlaw.com</a> 170 South Main Street, Suite 1500 Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1644
BULLOUGH ABATEMENT, INC.	KIPP & CHRISTIAN Shawn McGarry <a href="mailto:asbestos@kipbandchristian.com">asbestos@kipbandchristian.com</a> 10 Exchange Place, 4th Floor Salt Lake City, UT 84111
BULLOUGH ASBESTOS	KIPP & CHRISTIAN Shawn McGarry <a href="mailto:asbestos@kipbandchristian.com">asbestos@kipbandchristian.com</a> 10 Exchange Place, 4th Floor Salt Lake City, UT 84111
BULLOUGH INSULATION, INC.	KIPP & CHRISTIAN Shawn McGarry <a href="mailto:asbestos@kipbandchristian.com">asbestos@kipbandchristian.com</a> 10 Exchange Place, 4th Floor Salt Lake City, UT 84111
BAYER CROPSCIENCE USA, INC.	KIPP & CHRISTIAN Gregory J. Sanders <a href="mailto:Gjsanders@kipbandchristian.com">Gjsanders@kipbandchristian.com</a> cc: <a href="mailto:asbestos@kipbandchristian.com">asbestos@kipbandchristian.com</a> 10 Exchange Place, 4th Floor Salt Lake City, UT 84111
CHEVRON, INC	KIPP & CHRISTIAN Gregory J. Sanders <a href="mailto:Gjsanders@kipbandchristian.com">Gjsanders@kipbandchristian.com</a> cc: <a href="mailto:asbestos@kipbandchristian.com">asbestos@kipbandchristian.com</a> 10 Exchange Place, 4th Floor Salt Lake City, UT 84111
DOW CHEMICAL COMPANY	KIPP & CHRISTIAN Gregory J. Sanders <a href="mailto:Gjsanders@kipbandchristian.com">Gjsanders@kipbandchristian.com</a> cc: <a href="mailto:asbestos@kipbandchristian.com">asbestos@kipbandchristian.com</a> 10 Exchange Place, 4th Floor Salt Lake City, UT 84111
GENERAL ELECTRIC	KIPP & CHRISTIAN Gregory J. Sanders <a href="mailto:Gjsanders@kipbandchristian.com">Gjsanders@kipbandchristian.com</a> cc: <a href="mailto:asbestos@kipbandchristian.com">asbestos@kipbandchristian.com</a> 10 Exchange Place, 4th Floor Salt Lake City, UT 84111
LENNOX INDUSTRIES, INC.	KIPP & CHRISTIAN Gregory J. Sanders <a href="mailto:Gjsanders@kipbandchristian.com">Gjsanders@kipbandchristian.com</a>

	cc: <a href="mailto:asbestos@kippanchristian.com">asbestos@kippanchristian.com</a> 10 Exchange Place, 4th Floor Salt Lake City, UT 84111
ATLAS COPCO WAGNER	KIRTON & McCONKIE James Ellsworth <a href="mailto:jellsworth@kmclaw.com">jellsworth@kmclaw.com</a> Jason Beutler <a href="mailto:jbeutler@kmclaw.com">jbeutler@kmclaw.com</a> 60 East South Temple #1800 Salt Lake City UT 84145-0120
ALLIS CHALMERS(Allis-Chalmers Corporation Product Liability Trust)	LARSON & LARSON Brett C. Coonrod 11300 Tomahawk Creek Pkwy., Suite 310 Leawood, KS 66211 Tel: (913) 253-3104Fax: (913) 253-3109
RAPID-AMERICAN CORPORATION	MCCONNELL SIDERIUS FLEISCHNER HOUGHTALING & CRAIGMILE James M. Miletich <a href="mailto:jmiletich@msfhc.com">jmiletich@msfhc.com</a> 4700 South Syracuse Street, Suite 200 Denver, CO 80202 Todd S. Winegar <a href="mailto:Todd.Winegar@azbar.org">Todd.Winegar@azbar.org</a> P.O. Box 353 Salt Lake City, UT 84110
PACIFIC COAST BUILDING PRODUCTS, INC.	Michael J. Cooper <a href="mailto:mkb21@comcast.net">mkb21@comcast.net</a> 1743 West 6200 South, Suite 5 Salt Lake City, UT 84118
DURABLE MANUFACTURING COMPANY, INC.	MORGAN, MINNOCK, RICE & JAMES, L.C. Jonathan L. Hawkins <a href="mailto:jhawkins@mmrj.com">jhawkins@mmrj.com</a> Kearns Building, 8th Floor 136 South Main Street Salt Lake City, Utah 84101
CURTISS-WRIGHT CORPORATION	PARR, WADDUPS, BROWN, GEE & LOVELESS Patricia W. Christensen <a href="mailto:pwc@pwlaw.com">pwc@pwlaw.com</a> 185 South State Street, Suite 1300 Salt Lake City, UT 84111-1537
DRESSER INDUSTRIES, INC.	PARR, WADDUPS, BROWN, GEE & LOVELESS Patricia W. Christensen <a href="mailto:pwc@pwlaw.com">pwc@pwlaw.com</a> 185 South State Street, Suite 1300 Salt Lake City, UT 84111-1537
UTILITY TRAILER MANUFACTURING CO.	PARR, WADDUPS, BROWN, GEE & LOVELESS Patricia W. Christensen <a href="mailto:pwc@pwlaw.com">pwc@pwlaw.com</a> 185 South State Street, Suite 1300 Salt Lake City, UT 84111-1537
VOUGHT AIRCRAFT INDUSTRIES, INC.	PARR, WADDUPS, BROWN, GEE & LOVELESS Patricia W. Christensen <a href="mailto:pwc@pwlaw.com">pwc@pwlaw.com</a> 185 South State Street, Suite 1300 Salt Lake City, UT 84111-1537
A.W. CHESTERTON	PARR, WADDUPS, BROWN, GEE & LOVELESS Patricia W. Christensen <a href="mailto:pwc@pwlaw.com">pwc@pwlaw.com</a> 185 South State Street, Suite 1300 Salt Lake City, UT 84111-1537
GARDENA HOLDINGS, INC.	PARR, WADDUPS, BROWN, GEE & LOVELESS Patricia W. Christensen <a href="mailto:pwc@pwlaw.com">pwc@pwlaw.com</a> 185 South State Street, Suite 1300

	Salt Lake City, UT 84111-1537
CRANE CO.	PARSONS BEHLE & LATIMER Katherine E. Venti <a href="mailto:kventi@parsonsbehle.com">kventi@parsonsbehle.com</a> cc: <a href="mailto:asbestos@parsonsbehle.com">asbestos@parsonsbehle.com</a> P.O. Box 45898 Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0898
ITT INDUSTRIES, INC.	PARSONS BEHLE & LATIMER Katherine E. Venti <a href="mailto:kventi@parsonsbehle.com">kventi@parsonsbehle.com</a> cc: <a href="mailto:asbestos@parsonsbehle.com">asbestos@parsonsbehle.com</a> P.O. Box 45898 Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0898
TEREX CORPORATION	PARSONS BEHLE & LATIMER Katherine E. Venti <a href="mailto:kventi@parsonsbehle.com">kventi@parsonsbehle.com</a> cc: <a href="mailto:asbestos@parsonsbehle.com">asbestos@parsonsbehle.com</a> P.O. Box 45898 Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0898
FREIGHTLINER CORP.	PLANT CHRISTENSEN & KANELL Scott W. Christensen <a href="mailto:schristensen@pwcklaw.com">schristensen@pwcklaw.com</a> 136 East South Temple, Suite 1700 Salt Lake City, UT 84111
PLUMBERS SUPPLY	PRINDLE, DECKER & AMARO Kenneth Prindle <a href="mailto:kprindle@pdalaw.com">kprindle@pdalaw.com</a> 310 Golden Shore, Fourth Floor Long Beach, CA 90802
DEXTER CORPORATION, THE	RAY QUINNEY & NEBEKER Rick L. Rose <a href="mailto:rrose@rqn.com">rrose@rqn.com</a> Gregory Roberts <a href="mailto:groberts@rqn.com">groberts@rqn.com</a> P.O. Box 45385 Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0385
HARNISCHFEGGER CORPORATION	RAY QUINNEY & NEBEKER Rick L. Rose <a href="mailto:rrose@rqn.com">rrose@rqn.com</a> Gregory Roberts <a href="mailto:groberts@rqn.com">groberts@rqn.com</a> P.O. Box 45385 Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0385
KENNECOTT UTAH COPPER CORPORATION	RAY QUINNEY & NEBEKER Rick L. Rose <a href="mailto:rrose@rqn.com">rrose@rqn.com</a> Gregory Roberts <a href="mailto:groberts@rqn.com">groberts@rqn.com</a> P.O. Box 45385 Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0385
KIRKHILL RUBBER COMPANY	RAY QUINNEY & NEBEKER Rick L. Rose <a href="mailto:rrose@rqn.com">rrose@rqn.com</a> Gregory Roberts <a href="mailto:groberts@rqn.com">groberts@rqn.com</a> P.O. Box 45385 Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0385
LEAR SIEGLER DIVERSIFIED HOLDINGS CORPORATION	RAY QUINNEY & NEBEKER Rick L. Rose <a href="mailto:rrose@rqn.com">rrose@rqn.com</a> Gregory Roberts <a href="mailto:groberts@rqn.com">groberts@rqn.com</a> P.O. Box 45385 Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0385
MORRIS MATERIAL HANDLING, INC.	RAY QUINNEY & NEBEKER Rick L. Rose <a href="mailto:rrose@rqn.com">rrose@rqn.com</a> Gregory Roberts <a href="mailto:groberts@rqn.com">groberts@rqn.com</a>

	P.O. Box 45385 Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0385
OAKFABCO, INC.,	RAY QUINNEY & NEBEKER Rick L. Rose <a href="mailto:rrose@rqn.com">rrose@rqn.com</a> Gregory Roberts <a href="mailto:groberts@rqn.com">groberts@rqn.com</a> P.O. Box 45385 Salt Lake City, UT 84145-0385
ALCO PRODUCTS, a division of Nitram Energy, Inc.	RICHARDS BRANDT MILLER & NELSON Melinda A. Morgan <a href="mailto:melinda-morgan@rbmn.com">melinda-morgan@rbmn.com</a> Key Bank Tower, Seventh Floor 50 South Main Street Salt Lake City, UT 84110-2465
ANCHOR DARLING VALVE COMPANY	RICHARDS BRANDT MILLER & NELSON Melinda A. Morgan <a href="mailto:melinda-morgan@rbmn.com">melinda-morgan@rbmn.com</a> Key Bank Tower, Seventh Floor 50 South Main Street Salt Lake City, UT 84110-2465
AQUA-CHEM, INC. (Cleaver-Brooks, a division of);	RICHARDS BRANDT MILLER & NELSON Melinda A. Morgan <a href="mailto:melinda-morgan@rbmn.com">melinda-morgan@rbmn.com</a> Key Bank Tower, Seventh Floor 50 South Main Street Salt Lake City, UT 84110-2465
CLEAVER-BROOKS, a division of AQUA-CHEM, INC.	RICHARDS BRANDT MILLER & NELSON Melinda A. Morgan <a href="mailto:melinda-morgan@rbmn.com">melinda-morgan@rbmn.com</a> Key Bank Tower, Seventh Floor 50 South Main Street Salt Lake City, UT 84110-2465
CONGOLEUM CORPORATION	RICHARDS BRANDT MILLER & NELSON Melinda A. Morgan <a href="mailto:melinda-morgan@rbmn.com">melinda-morgan@rbmn.com</a> Key Bank Tower, Seventh Floor 50 South Main Street Salt Lake City, UT 84110-2465
E.V. ROBERTS & ASSOCIATES, INC.	RICHARDS BRANDT MILLER & NELSON Melinda A. Morgan <a href="mailto:melinda-morgan@rbmn.com">melinda-morgan@rbmn.com</a> Key Bank Tower, Seventh Floor 50 South Main Street Salt Lake City, UT 84110-2465
FLOWSERVE US, INC. (f/k/a Durco) VALTEK, INC. (n/k/a Flowserve Corporation)	RICHARDS BRANDT MILLER & NELSON Melinda A. Morgan <a href="mailto:melinda-morgan@rbmn.com">melinda-morgan@rbmn.com</a> Key Bank Tower, Seventh Floor 50 South Main Street Salt Lake City, UT 84110-2465
HAMILTON MATERIALS, INC.	RICHARDS BRANDT MILLER & NELSON Melinda A. Morgan <a href="mailto:melinda-morgan@rbmn.com">melinda-morgan@rbmn.com</a> Key Bank Tower, Seventh Floor 50 South Main Street Salt Lake City, UT 84110-2465
LAHABRA PRODUCTS, INC.	RICHARDS BRANDT MILLER & NELSON Melinda A. Morgan <a href="mailto:melinda-morgan@rbmn.com">melinda-morgan@rbmn.com</a> Key Bank Tower, Seventh Floor 50 South Main Street Salt Lake City, UT 84110-2465

OSRAM SYLVANIA, INC.	RICHARDS BRANDT MILLER & NELSON Melinda A. Morgan <a href="mailto:melinda-morgan@rbmn.com">melinda-morgan@rbmn.com</a> Key Bank Tower, Seventh Floor 50 South Main Street Salt Lake City, UT 84110-2465
OWENS-ILLINOIS	RICHARDS BRANDT MILLER & NELSON Melinda A. Morgan <a href="mailto:melinda-morgan@rbmn.com">melinda-morgan@rbmn.com</a> Key Bank Tower, Seventh Floor 50 South Main Street Salt Lake City, UT 84110-2465
ALLIED CHEMICAL	SNELL & WILMER L.L.P. <a href="mailto:swasbestos@swlaw.com">swasbestos@swlaw.com</a> Tracy H. Fowler Kamie F. Brown Angela Stander 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
BOEING NORTH AMERICA	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@swlaw.com">swasbestos@swlaw.com</a> Tracy Fowler Kamie F. Brown 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
BRADSHAW AUTO PARTS COMPANY OF SUGARHOUSE	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@swlaw.com">swasbestos@swlaw.com</a> Tracy H. Fowler David N. Wolf James D. Gardner 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
GL&V/DORR OLIVER INC. (also Keeler/dorr-oliver Boiler Company)	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@swlaw.com">swasbestos@swlaw.com</a> Tracy F. Fowler Kamie Brown 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
VIACOM, INC.	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@swlaw.com">swasbestos@swlaw.com</a> Tracy F. Fowler David Wolf Kamie Brown 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
KAISER GYPSUM COMPANY, INC.	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@swlaw.com">swasbestos@swlaw.com</a> Tracy Fowler Todd Shaughnessy

	15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
NISSAN NORTH AMERICA, INC.	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@swlaw.com">swasbestos@swlaw.com</a> Tracy Fowler James Gardner 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
GENERAL MOTORS CORPORATION	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@swlaw.com">swasbestos@swlaw.com</a> Bryon J. Benevento Dan R. Larsen 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
FORD MOTOR COMPANY	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@swlaw.com">swasbestos@swlaw.com</a> Bryon J. Benevento Dan R. Larsen 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
VOLKSWAGEN OF AMERICA, INC.	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@swlaw.com">swasbestos@swlaw.com</a> Bryon J. Benevento James D. Gardner 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
BUCYRUS INTERNATIONAL, INC.	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@svlaw.com">swasbestos@svlaw.com</a> Tracy F. Fowler Kamie Brown 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
KEELER/DORR- OLIVER BOILER(GL&V/DORR OLIVER INC.)	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@svlaw.com">swasbestos@svlaw.com</a> Tracy F. Fowler Kamie Brown 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
HANSON PERMANENTE CEMENT, INC.	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@swlaw.com">swasbestos@swlaw.com</a> Tracy Fowler Todd Shaughnessy 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547

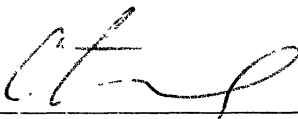
CONOCOPHILLIPS COMPANY	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@swlaw.com">swasbestos@swlaw.com</a> Tracy H. Fowler Kamie F. Brown Angela Stander 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
PHILLIPS PETROLEUM COMPANY, aka (ConocoPhillips Co)	SNELL & WILMER LLP <a href="mailto:swasbestos@swlaw.com">swasbestos@swlaw.com</a> Tracy H. Fowler Kamie F. Brown Angela Stander 15 W. South Temple, Suite 1200 Gateway Tower West Salt Lake City, Utah 84101-1547
THERMAL WEST INDUSTRIAL, INC.	SNOW, CHRISTENSEN & MARTINEAU <a href="mailto:asbestos@scmlaw.com">asbestos@scmlaw.com</a> Allan L. Larson 10 Exchange Place Suite 1100 Salt Lake City, UT 84145
SEQUOIA VENTURES, INC.	SNOW, CHRISTENSEN & MARTINEAU <a href="mailto:asbestos@scmlaw.com">asbestos@scmlaw.com</a> John Lund 10 Exchange Place Suite 1100 Salt Lake City, UT 84145
GENUINE PARTS COMPANY	SNOW, CHRISTENSEN & MARTINEAU <a href="mailto:asbestos@scmlaw.com">asbestos@scmlaw.com</a> Julianne P. Blanch 10 Exchange Place Suite 1100 Salt Lake City, UT 84145
BASF CORPORATION	SNOW, CHRISTENSEN & MARTINEAU <a href="mailto:asbestos@scmlaw.com">asbestos@scmlaw.com</a> John Lund 10 Exchange Place Suite 1100 Salt Lake City, UT 84145
BECHTEL CORPORATION (DE)	SNOW, CHRISTENSEN & MARTINEAU <a href="mailto:asbestos@scmlaw.com">asbestos@scmlaw.com</a> John Lund 10 Exchange Place Suite 1100 Salt Lake City, UT 84145
PARKER BOILER COMPANY	SNOW, CHRISTENSEN & MARTINEAU <a href="mailto:asbestos@scmlaw.com">asbestos@scmlaw.com</a> John Lund 10 Exchange Place Suite 1100 Salt Lake City, UT 84145
SEARS, ROEBUCK & CO.	SNOW, CHRISTENSEN & MARTINEAU <a href="mailto:asbestos@scmlaw.com">asbestos@scmlaw.com</a> John Lund 10 Exchange Place Suite 1100 Salt Lake City, UT 84145
HAFERS INC.	SNOW, CHRISTENSEN & MARTINEAU

	<a href="mailto:asbestos@scmlaw.com">asbestos@scmlaw.com</a> John Lund Jill L. Dunyon 10 Exchange Place Suite 1100 Salt Lake City, UT 84145
SHELL OIL COMPANY	SNOW, CHRISTENSEN & MARTINEAU <a href="mailto:asbestos@scmlaw.com">asbestos@scmlaw.com</a> John Lund Julianne P. Blanch 10 Exchange Place Suite 1100 Salt Lake City, UT 84145
STUART-WESTERN, INC.	SNOW, CHRISTENSEN & MARTINEAU <a href="mailto:asbestos@scmlaw.com">asbestos@scmlaw.com</a> John Lund Julianne P. Blanch 10 Exchange Place Suite 1100 Salt Lake City, UT 84145
MONSANTO COMPANY	STOEL RIVES, LLP <a href="mailto:asbestos@stoel.com">asbestos@stoel.com</a> D. Matthew Moscon 201 Main St., Suite 1100 Salt Lake City, UT 84111
FMC CORPORATION	STOEL RIVES, LLP <a href="mailto:asbestos@stoel.com">asbestos@stoel.com</a> D. Matthew Moscon Mark E. Hindley Justin B. Palmer 201 Main St., Suite 1100 Salt Lake City, UT 84111
BURNHAM CORPORATION	STRONG & HANNI <a href="mailto:asbestos@strongandhanni.com">asbestos@strongandhanni.com</a> Joseph Joyce Lisa Gray Three Triad Center, Suite 500 Salt Lake City, UT 84180
BURTON LUMBER & HARDWARE CO.	STRONG & HANNI <a href="mailto:asbestos@strongandhanni.com">asbestos@strongandhanni.com</a> Joseph Joyce Lisa Gray Three Triad Center, Suite 500 Salt Lake City, UT 84180
CHRIS & DICK'S	STRONG & HANNI <a href="mailto:asbestos@strongandhanni.com">asbestos@strongandhanni.com</a> Joseph Joyce Lisa Gray Three Triad Center, Suite 500 Salt Lake City, UT 84180
GARLOCK, INC.	STRONG & HANNI <a href="mailto:asbestos@strongandhanni.com">asbestos@strongandhanni.com</a> Joseph Joyce Lisa Gray Three Triad Center, Suite 500



	Salt Lake City, UT 84180
GOULDS PUMPS, INC.	STRONG & HANNI <a href="mailto:asbestos@strongandhanni.com">asbestos@strongandhanni.com</a> Joseph Joyce Lisa Gray Three Triad Center, Suite 500 Salt Lake City, UT 84180
INTERNATIONAL TRUCK AND ENGINE CORPORATION	STRONG & HANNI <a href="mailto:asbestos@strongandhanni.com">asbestos@strongandhanni.com</a> Joseph Joyce Lisa Gray Three Triad Center, Suite 500 Salt Lake City, UT 84180
ANCHOR PACKING COMPANY THE	STRONG & HANNI <a href="mailto:asbestos@strongandhanni.com">asbestos@strongandhanni.com</a> Joseph Joyce Lisa Gray Three Triad Center, Suite 500 Salt Lake City, UT 84180
ATLAS TURNER, INC.	SUITTER AXLAND Michael W. Homer <a href="mailto:Mhomer@sautah.com">Mhomer@sautah.com</a> Kevin D. Swenson <a href="mailto:kswenson@sautah.com">kswenson@sautah.com</a> Thomas Price <a href="mailto:Tprice@sautah.com">Tprice@sautah.com</a> 175 South West Temple Suite 700 Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1480
BABCOCK BORSIG POWER, INC. (D.B. RILEY, INC.)	SUITTER AXLAND Michael W. Homer <a href="mailto:Mhomer@sautah.com">Mhomer@sautah.com</a> Kevin D. Swenson <a href="mailto:kswenson@sautah.com">kswenson@sautah.com</a> Thomas Price <a href="mailto:Tprice@sautah.com">Tprice@sautah.com</a> 175 South West Temple Suite 700 Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1480
D.B. RILEY	SUITTER AXLAND Michael W. Homer <a href="mailto:Mhomer@sautah.com">Mhomer@sautah.com</a> Kevin D. Swenson <a href="mailto:kswenson@sautah.com">kswenson@sautah.com</a> Thomas Price <a href="mailto:Tprice@sautah.com">Tprice@sautah.com</a> 175 South West Temple Suite 700 Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1480
RILEY POWER, INC	SUITTER AXLAND Michael W. Homer <a href="mailto:Mhomer@sautah.com">Mhomer@sautah.com</a> Kevin D. Swenson <a href="mailto:kswenson@sautah.com">kswenson@sautah.com</a> Thomas Price <a href="mailto:Tprice@sautah.com">Tprice@sautah.com</a> 175 South West Temple Suite 700 Salt Lake City, UT 84101-1480
ROCKWELL AUTOMATION (SII to ALLEN-BRADLEY COMPANY)	TAYLOR, ADAMS, LOWE & HUTCHINSON <a href="mailto:asbestos@tayloradams.com">asbestos@tayloradams.com</a> Stephen F. Hutchinson Scott Cottingham 2180 South 1300 East, Suite 520 Salt Lake City, UT 84106-2843 GOODWIN PROCTER Reena N. Glazer <a href="mailto:Rglazer@goodwinprocter.com">Rglazer@goodwinprocter.com</a> 901 New York Ave., NW

	Washington, DC 20001
BURNS INTERNATIONAL SERVICES CORPORATION F.K.A. BORG-WARNER AUTOMOTIVE, INC.	WILLIAMS & HUNT <u>asbestos@wilhnt.com</u> Dennis Ferguson Mark R. Anderson PO BOX 45678 Salt Lake City, UT 84145
BW/IP INTERNATIONAL (f/k/a Borg Warner Industrial Products, Successor to Byron Jackson Pumps, Predecessor to Flowserve, Erroneously Identified as Flowserve)	WILLIAMS & HUNT <u>asbestos@wilhnt.com</u> Dennis Ferguson Mark R. Anderson PO BOX 45678 Salt Lake City, UT 84145
YORK INTERNATIONAL CORPORATION	WILLIAMS & HUNT <u>asbestos@wilhnt.com</u> Dennis Ferguson Mark R. Anderson PO BOX 45678 Salt Lake City, UT 84145




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