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## **Orkin Gets Tangled in Lawsuits, Inquiry**

The Associated Press

ORLANDO -- Pest control company Orkin is battling a deluge of court actions over its termite work in Florida, including a racketeering investigation by the state attorney general and a lawsuit seeking to represent 65,000 Florida customers.

A federal judge also recently upheld a multimillion-dollar arbitration judgment in favor of a customer from Ponte Vedra.

The complaints against Orkin, reported in the Orlando Sentinel, include: writing contracts with fineprint disclaimers on repair and retreatment guarantees; not doing adequate treatments and inspections; denying claims as a matter of policy; and forcing subcontractors to make repairs without the required building permits so the work could not be certified by inspectors.

Orkin, a \$670 million Atlantabased company with nearly 8,000 employees, denied all the allegations.

"To put the general issue of lawsuits in perspective, less than 1 percent of Orkin's termite customers file claims," said Orkin spokeswoman Martha Craft. "Of these claims, well over 98 percent are resolved to the customer's satisfaction without setting one foot in a courtroom."

Customer Collier Black of Ponte Vedra had documented termite repairs to his home over six years in which subcontractors hadn't pulled the required building permits.

Black won a \$4.25 million judgment at a 2003 arbitration hearing, which a federal judge later upheld, but reduced to \$2 million.

The arbitration panel ruled in Black's favor, saying the practice was "widespread." Black's lawyers uncovered hundreds of similar cases in North and Central Florida.

The case caught the attention of Florida Attorney General Charlie Crist, who started a racketeering investigation in April against Orkin, issuing a subpoena requesting company records and documents.

Craft said Orkin is cooperating, but the company has filed a lawsuit in Orange County seeking to block the state subpoena.

Another lawsuit, which accuses Orkin of deceptive and unfair trade practices, is seeking class action status at an Oct. 14 hearing in Hillsborough County Circuit Court. The suit would represent 65,000 Orkin customers if granted.

Orkin also settled a \$6.7 million lawsuit in 2003 over a termite damaged apartment complex in Hillsborough County. Terms of the settlement were confidential.

