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LITIGATION

Sempra Energy defeats lawsuit alleging malicious prosecution

Federal judge rejects claim that Sempra conspired with Mexican government

By Banks Albach
Daily Journal Staff Writer

A federal judge in San Diego sided with Sempra Energy in a long-running dispute with a Mexican rancher stemming from a billion-dollar natural gas terminal in Baja, Mexico.

Ramon Eugenio Sanchez Ritchie claimed Sempra conspired with Mexican authorities to illegally seize more than 600 acres of his land to license and build the terminal.

He was convicted by a Mexican court of criminal trespassing in 2006 after he went onto the land, roughly 15 miles outside of Ensenada, and allegedly threatened Sempra employees.

Undeterred, Ritchie sued Sempra in U.S. court. He accused Sempra of conspiring with the Mexican government and of lying to Mexican investigators and courts.

Ritchie's claim to the land date back to 1972. Sempra's Mexican affiliate, Energia

Costa Azul LNG, purchased the land in 2006, according to court documents.

Granting summary judgment Friday, U.S. District Judge Cathy Ann Bencivengo said she found no evidence to support Ritchie's claims. *Ritchie v. Sempra Energy*, 10-CV 1513 (S.D. Cal., filed July 20, 2010).

A Hueston Hennigan LLP team of attorneys led by partners John C. Hueston in Orange County and Marshall A. Camp in Los Angeles represented Sempra.

"I can tell you that the ruling itself was a huge vindication for Sempra," Camp said. "Sempra has contended throughout this case that the allegations were baseless. This was a long time coming and a very satisfying outcome."

Ritchie retained three legal teams from Williams & Connolly LLP in Washington, D.C., and the Law Offices of Leonard B. Simon and Hulett Harper Stewart LLP, both in San Diego.

"Obviously, we respectfully disagree with the court's ruling and intend to appeal," partner Kirk B. Hulett said, "I can't speak for the other firms, but that's our intention."