

Pa. Gas Cos. Sued Over Heater Explosion That Killed 6

By **Matthew Santoni**

Law360 (July 22, 2025, 6:14 PM EDT) -- Natural gas from a leaking pipeline allegedly filled the basement of a suburban Pittsburgh home, fueling an explosion that leveled three houses and killed six people in 2023, according to lawsuits filed Tuesday by the families of three victims.

The children of Paul and Heather Oravitz **claimed** that Penneco Oil & Gas Ltd. or its associated companies did not fix a faulty pressure regulator, an over-pressured gas collector line or a leak in the line that ran behind the Rustic Ridge neighborhood in Plum, Pennsylvania, which allowed odorless gas to travel through the soil and collect in the Oravitzes' basement. A nearly **identical complaint** was filed by the widow of Kevin Sebulnia, another of the victims.

On the morning of Aug. 12, 2023, the Oravitzes, Sebulnia and three others were trying to diagnose an apparent problem with the Oravitzes' water heater when it triggered a massive explosion and fire that fatally injured all six, the suit said.

"Penneco knew that the line was over-pressurized and that allowing such high pressure in the line created a substantial risk the line could fail and an explosion could occur. Despite this knowledge, Penneco failed to address the pressurization prior to the explosion," said the complaints. "Between August 8, 2023 and the explosion on August 12, 2023, Penneco took no steps to vent the gas in the subject line."

The suits made claims including negligence and wrongful death against Peoples Natural Gas, Penneco and its associated companies, and the developer of the neighborhood. They also included strict liability claims against AO Smith Corp., the maker of the water heater.

According to the two complaints filed Tuesday in the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, the loops and cul-de-sacs of the Rustic Ridge neighborhood are close to three natural-gas wells, a compressor station, and pipelines that gather and consolidate gas from the wells.

The pipelines connecting the compressor station to the wells formed a cross at a corner of the development, near the rear of the Oravitz property at 141 Rustic Ridge Drive. But the suits claimed the compressor station had a faulty regulator for the pipeline pressure, and the branch connecting the gathering lines to the station had allegedly shown steadily-growing pressure in the months leading up to the explosion.

That mounting pressure increased the risk of breaks, leaks and gas escaping, the suits said, and that was what they blamed for the August 12 explosion. Natural gas — odorless at the stage where it was being gathered — allegedly seeped from a two-inch leak in the pipeline into the Oravitz basement, possibly for days prior to the blast, they claimed.

The morning of the explosion, the water heater at 141 Rustic Ridge was making loud, unusual noises, the suits said. Neighbors Michael Thomas, Kevin Sebulnia, Casey Clontz and Keegan Clontz all came over to try to diagnose and fix the problem.

According to the complaints, AO Smith's manuals for the water heater say some noises are normal, but the Oravitz heater kept making noise even after the neighbors shut off the gas utility line — which the suits said was a sign it was still temporarily running off the gas that had filled the air.

"The subject water heater continued to make loud and distinct noises because the water heater was being fueled by the leaked odorless gas that had filled the basement," the complaints said. "There

are no warnings on or otherwise included with the subject water heater to inform consumers that when the subject water heater makes noises, those noises can result from the water heater burning an external fuel source."

At 10:22 a.m., the Oravitz house violently exploded, with the complaints including pictures from a neighbor's doorbell camera illustrating the column of fire and debris.

The suits said everyone in and around the house survived the initial explosion, but suffered painful and ultimately fatal injuries. Heather Oravitz died that afternoon, while Paul died more than four days later after suffering burns on 70% of his body, the Oravitz complaint said.

The other four victims were trapped in the burning debris of the basement, alive and conscious enough for Casey Clontz to make one last phone call to his wife — Keegan's mother — for six minutes, according to the lawsuits.

"Michael Thomas, Kevin Sebunia, Casey Clontz, and Keegan Clontz died horrific deaths," the complaint said.

The lawsuits said Peoples Natural Gas had known the compressor station's regulator was malfunctioning and had told Penneco to shut off the pipeline from two of its wells for a week or until it was fixed. Despite the "shut-in" order from Peoples, Penneco did not vent the gas from the wells themselves or fix the regulator before the explosion, the suits said.

The complaints also said Penneco had known that section of pipeline had leaked before, noting the company made a repair in 2017, but didn't continue to keep a close eye on the rest of the line.

The families said AO Smith was liable for selling a water heater that could keep running off gas coming from outside its utility line, and developer Grasinger Homes was allegedly negligent for building in such proximity to natural gas pipelines and not warning homebuyers or providing them with gas detectors for their homes. The suit included numerous "John Doe" placeholders for any other entities that might have been responsible for the pipeline.

While the families blamed the gas pipeline for causing the explosion, the National Transportation Safety Board had passed on investigating, according to local media reports. At the time, the federal agency had pointed to indications that the water heater had been the source of the explosive gas.

Peoples put out a statement Tuesday, saying "It is important to note that the Pennsylvania Public Utility Commission conducted an extensive investigation and, at the conclusion of the investigation, found no evidence linking Peoples' public utility infrastructure to the cause of the incident."

An attorney for the Oravitzes said more suits from the other families would be forthcoming.

"We are honored to represent Kayla and Cole Oravitz on behalf of their mother and father lost in the explosion," said Benjamin J. Baer of Injury Law Partners. "We are looking forward... to holding those responsible accountable for what occurred."

The law firm of Kline & Specter is representing the Sebunia family.

"This tragedy was entirely preventable. Our investigation has revealed a number of failures that contributed to this explosion," said Dominic Guerrini of Kline & Specter on Tuesday. "At multiple points along the way, simple steps should have been taken to avoid this horrific outcome. We look forward to the opportunity to obtain justice for the Sebunia family and to work with the defendants to enact common sense measures designed to prevent another tragedy like this one."

A spokesperson for AO Smith declined to comment Tuesday. Representatives for the Penneco companies did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Representatives for Grasinger could not be reached.

The Oravitz family is represented by Benjamin J. Baer and David J. Langsam of Injury Law Partners.

The Sebunia family is represented by Shanin Specter, Dominic C. Guerrini and Conor Lamb of Kline &

Specter PC.

Counsel information for the defendants was not immediately available.

The cases are Seburnia v. AO Smith Corp. et al., case number GD-25-007967, and Oravitz et al. v. AO Smith Corp. et al., case number GD-25-007970, in the Court of Common Pleas for Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.

--Editing by Emily Kokoll.