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Portland judge approves class-action insurance settlement

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Oregon Federal District Judge Anna Brown has approved a settlement agreement between Hartford Fire Insurance Co. and more than 700,000 policy holders.

Policyholders sued Hartford Fire, based in Hartford, Conn., and its subsidiaries for failing to provide notice when it charged more for insurance based on information contained in credit reports. The Fair Credit Reporting Act requires such notification. The Portland firm Stoll Stoll Berne Lokting & Shlachter served as lead plaintiffs' attorney.

Under the settlement, qualified class-action members are eligible for payment of at least \$150. Claim forms will be mailed to eligible class-action members within 60 days, unless an appeal is filed.

The Oregon District Court initially ruled that Hartford Fire complied with the reporting act. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed and remanded the case back to district court. Hartford's petition for review by the U.S. Supreme Court is pending.

Two related cases involving Safeco and Geico were heard in the nation's highest court Jan. 16. A decision is pending.

"This settlement is important for all consumers," said Steve Larson, lead plaintiff's attorney. "Consumers need to be made aware that their credit report may have adversely impacted their insurance premiums."

Last fall, Oregon voters overwhelmingly rejected a ballot measure that would have prohibited insurance companies from using credit scores to calculate rates or premiums. Measure 42 failed with 876,075 "no" votes to 479,935 "yes" votes.

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