

Orkin, Complex Settle Lawsuit

COMPANY WAS ACCUSED
OF FALSIFYING RECORDS

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TAMPA — Pest control giant Orkin settled a case Friday with a Clearwater apartment complex that sued the company for faking treatments and inspections, leaving residents vulnerable to pests that eventually caused severe damage.

Coachman Crossing Apartments, a 218-unit complex, has a contract with Orkin to remove termites. The apartment owners sued the company for \$6.7 million after swarms of termites were found.

By 1998, the complex was badly infested and damaged.

Both sides wouldn't disclose any details of their settlement.

In a two-sentence statement, Orkin announced "the amicable resolution of the lawsuit."

"Terms of the resolution are confidential," it said.

Orkin spokeswoman Martha Craft refused to answer questions about the statement.

The lawsuit, filed in October 1998 in Hillsborough County Cir-

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Class-action suit possible.

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cuit Court, accused the company of leaving the complex's owners and residents vulnerable to pests. Orkin, it alleged, faked treatments and re-inspections.

The trial was expected to last several weeks. Proceedings began Monday.

Pete Cardillo, the attorney for Coachman Crossing, also wouldn't comment on the terms of the settlement.

Cardillo wouldn't say whether the settlement gave Coachman Crossing anything close to the \$6.7 million it was asking.

The Coachman Crossing complaint is the first case against Orkin to go to trial in Florida after former employees admitted they routinely forged customers' signatures on reinspection tickets. The work was never done, they said.

Orkin, which is based in Atlanta, operates 400 offices nationwide, employing 7,500 people.

In depositions taken in the case, former Orkin employees said there was too much work to get done and managers were under pressure to post big earnings and performance numbers for the company.

Court records included company documents from managers warning employees that forgery, theft and fraud would leave the company vulnerable to lawsuits.

In what might be Orkin's largest Florida case yet, the company is appealing a circuit judge's decision to grant class-action status to a lawsuit representing individual homeowners.

If that class-action status is upheld, it could mean as many as 100,000 Florida homeowners could have claims against the company.

The Associated Press contributed to this report. Reporter Cassio Furtado can be reached at (813) 259-7616.