



Crist signs workers' compensation bill that limits lawyer fees

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By BILL KACZOR - The Associated Press

Business interests hailed Gov. Charlie Crist's signing Friday of a bill that will undo a court ruling and restore caps on fees for lawyers who represent workers in compensation appeals for on-the-job injuries.

Trial lawyers, though, said the new law eventually will lead to another legal challenge because it removes an existing provision saying those fees should be "reasonable."

The Florida Supreme Court cited the reasonableness requirement when it struck down the fee limits last year.

Employers said the law will lower the premiums they pay for workers' compensation insurance. They had been lobbying Crist to sign the bill while trial lawyers had urged him to veto the measure.

"Without this legislation, businesses faced ongoing double-digit increases in their workers' comp premiums," said Associated Industries of Florida president and CEO Barney Bishop.

Florida's rates were among the nation's highest until 2003 when the Legislature tightened the fee limits, which do not apply to lawyers who represent insurance companies and employers.

Since then, premiums dropped steadily by a total of more than 60 percent until April 1, the date a 6.4 percent increase took effect.

Crist signed the bill without ceremony or immediate comment.

The justices had ruled in the case of Emma Murray, a nurse injured lifting a patient at a nursing home.

With the help of a lawyer, she won \$3,244 in back wages and medical expenses after her employer's insurance company initially denied her claim. Due to the fee limit, though, the lawyer was paid only \$648 for 200 hours of work while attorneys on the other side got about \$16,000.

The Supreme Court ruled that discrepancy violated the reasonableness standard and ordered Murray's lawyer to also be paid \$16,000.