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Ex-DOT employee awarded damages

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Staff

He said a supervisor mocked his religion and ancestry.

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A U.S. District Court jury in Des Moines awarded nearly \$232,000 in damages Thursday to a former Iowa Department of Transportation employee who claimed a supervisor mocked his Muslim beliefs and his Iranian ancestry.

The eight-member, all-white jury returned the verdict in favor of Farrokh Fattahi, 54, of Ames, who was allegedly called a "towel head" and a "camel jockey" by Lee Hammer, his state supervisor, according to court testimony.

On one occasion, a state employee in Hammer's office inquired as to Fattahi's whereabouts. At the time, Fattahi was walking into the office, and Hammer responded to the other employee by saying Fattahi was probably someplace praying and then said, "Allah, Allah, salami, salami" and bobbed his head, court documents alleged.

Dena Gray-Fisher, a spokeswoman at DOT headquarters in Ames, said Thursday that state officials dispute Fattahi's claims of discrimination and were studying the verdict and considering a possible appeal. She said the department has "documented evidence of inadequate work performance and a refusal to perform job assignments."

Hammer has flatly denied making disparaging remarks about Fattahi's ancestry and religion, court documents said.

Fattahi, a U.S. citizen who emigrated from Iran, spent 22 years with the state agency as an architectural designer before leaving in February 2002. His lawyer, Tom Newkirk of Johnston, said his client resigned to keep his options open because state officials were trying to build a case to fire him.

"Many people would think this case has something to do with" the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, Newkirk said. "It has nothing to do with it. This bigotry pre-existed 9/11."

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