

EXHIBIT H



The U.S. Coast Guard announced on Twitter Feb. 3 that the Key Largo Volunteer Fire Department found the body of Rob Stewart, a famous Canadian conservationist and filmmaker. Two months later, the department says it has no dive team. Twitter

LOCAL

Fire department denies having a dive team

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The Key Largo Volunteer Fire Department denies that it has a dive rescue team, despite remaining silent for two months while the world credited such an entity for organizing and embarking on a risky deep-water operation that found the body of famed Canadian conservationist and filmmaker Rob Stewart in early February off Islamorada.

The sudden distancing between the department and the dive team is rooted in a lawsuit filed this week in Broward County Circuit Court by Stewart's family against Key Largo's Horizon Dive Adventures and a Fort Lauderdale diving equipment company called Add Helium LLC.

It also appears that paperwork belonging to firefighters who remained with the department following a corporate changeover in 2013 is missing. Among those whose paperwork is gone is Rob Bleser, the Key Largo dive shop owner who for the past 15 years has led a dozen successful at-sea recoveries of bodies and two rescues, all while volunteering for either the Key Largo Fire-Rescue Department, which lost its contract with the special taxing district that

pays for Key Largo's emergency services in 2013, or the current Key Largo Volunteer Fire Department.

"Every one of those was done under the auspices of the fire department," Bleser said Thursday. "I've never been notified verbally or in writing in any way to cease operations."

But Jack Bridges, attorney for the Key Largo Volunteer Fire Department, said a department dive team does not exist.

"Indeed, neither KLVFD nor any other fire department in Monroe County has a dive team," Bridges said in a March 28 email to *The Reporter*. "Diver emergency calls don't even come to KLVFD. Instead, they go to private individuals, who are not affiliated with KLVFD in this capacity. Some members of KLVFD are also members of local diver recovery teams. They perform this service on their own time, though. KLVFD does not assign firefighters to this task, nor do we release them from their shifts to go on such missions."

Stewart, 37, went missing on Jan. 31 after coming up from a 230-foot dive off Islamorada while filming a documentary on shark conservation. After a massive multi-agency search, the U.S. Coast Guard officially ceased looking for Stewart the evening of Feb. 3. About an hour after announcing the search was over that afternoon, divers found his body about 300 feet from where he disappeared more than 225 feet below the surface.

The Coast Guard, when announcing the body was found by a remotely operated vehicle, credited the Key Largo Volunteer Fire Department. But Bridges said that never happened because there is no Key Largo Volunteer Fire Department dive team and Bleser was out there on his own.

"Clearly, we exercise no control over Mr. Bleser or his dive team. Hence, he is not our employee," Bridges said. "Likewise, since we don't contract with him for diver emergencies, he is not an independent contractor for the fire department. Like I said earlier, we don't pay him or even reimburse his costs."

The department's denial of having a dive team coincides with a private investigator working for a Pennsylvania law firm demanding Bridges provide public records related to the department's dive team. A partner in that firm, David Concannon, has been authorized to speak publicly for Add Helium's owner, Peter Sotis, but as of press time had not been retained to represent him against the Stewart's civil suit.

Asked by a reporter why the department never denied the existence of a dive team and never disputed claims that members of the Key Largo Volunteer Fire Department's dive team found Stewart's body — including multiple stories in this newspaper and a Feb. 16 editorial praising the dive team for its work finding Stewart — Bridges said he didn't read much about Stewart going missing.

"Until the public records request came up, I never really followed the Rob Stewart story," Bridges said Monday.

The paperwork

Other than the press coverage, there are other factors that would lead one to believe the department did have a dive team, including a line item for \$800 for dive team training in the department's 2016-2017 budget; the department stating on its website that its firefighters are "trained in water emergency and recoveries;" and a 2013 annual report — after the corporate changeover to the current department — that states, "Key Largo is home to one of the most elite special response teams — the Water Emergency Team."

Bridges said much of that year's annual report was cut and pasted from the old department, which he said did have a dive team.

The sudden distancing of the department from the dive team likely rests in the fact that Bleser was the leader and most constant member of the team. It also likely has to do with the fact that Bleser coordinated the search for Stewart on the *Pisces*, the Horizon dive boat that took Stewart on the film shoot. Some of the crew that participated in the search were also there when Stewart went missing.

“How many of these people are certified firefighters or meet the requirements to be volunteer firefighters under Florida law,” Concannon said in an email. “Answer: None.”

That day, Jan. 31, Stewart and Sotis emerged from their third deep dive in one day. Sotis immediately showed signs of distress and was brought on board the *Pisces*. While the crew tended to him, Stewart slipped beneath the waves. Stewart’s family blames the Horizon crew for taking their eyes off their son.

The family is suing Sotis because they say he rushed Rob Stewart’s training on complex rebreather gear, popular with deep divers. He was an experienced diver, but not at using rebreathers, which not carefully used, can be deadly because of gas mixtures. Their lawyers also argue that as Stewart’s instructor, Sotis should not have gotten on the *Pisces* first.

Bob Thomas, a commissioner on the Key Largo Fire-Rescue and Emergency Medical Services District, which controls the budgets of the fire department and the Ambulance Corps, vowed to stand by Bleser and get the proper paperwork in order to officially reinstate the dive team.

“We’ve been affiliated with Rob for many years, although for now, for some reason, the paperwork has disappeared. So we are now dotting the I’s and crossing the Ts to make sure he’s reinstated as a legal entity with the fire department,” Thomas said Thursday. “We have ridden on his back PR-wise for many years, and we are not about to turn our backs on him now.”