

Fox News hit by new claims of sexual misconduct by stars in lawsuit

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Two women have come forward with explosive new allegations of sexual misconduct at Fox News, claiming in a lawsuit that the former chief national correspondent of the cable channel, Ed Henry, subjected one of them to rape and sexual assault.

The federal lawsuit, lodged on Monday in the southern district of New York, accuses management at Fox News of failing to act over allegations of sexual impropriety against Henry dating back to as early as 2017. The channel fired its co-anchor earlier this month after details of the complaint surfaced.

The suit also contains bombshell allegations raised by a second woman, a former Fox News employee, Cathy Areu, who says she was sexually harassed by a slew of top personalities on the channel. They include the star anchor Sean Hannity, controversial host Tucker Carlson and media commentator Howard Kurtz.

The most serious allegations in the lawsuit relate to former Fox News employee Jennifer Eckhart. The suit accuses Henry of manipulating and grooming Eckhart when she was 24, asking her to be his “sex slave” and “little whore” and threatening her with retaliation if she did not comply.

The suit alleges that Henry sexually assaulted her on Fox News property and raped her while she was helpless and restrained in metal handcuffs at a hotel used by the channel to lodge visiting employees.

In its statement, Fox News said that Eckhart could pursue her claims directly with Henry “as Fox News already took swift action ... and Mr Henry is no longer employed by the network”.

Catherine Foti, Henry’s lawyer, said in a statement that “evidence in this case will demonstrate that Ms Eckhart initiated and completely encouraged a consensual relationship”. She said that Henry looked forward to presenting his own evidence including “graphic photos”.

Eckhart said that she hoped her decision to file suit “will result in positive change for women at Fox, and for all victims in the workplace”.

The complaint, drawn up by the prominent anti-discrimination lawyers Douglas Wigdor and Michael Willemin, also states that in March 2018 Hannity humiliated Areu, who was a regular guest on his show, while she was on set and in front of the entire studio crew.

He allegedly threw \$100 in cash on his desk on set and began exhorting men in the crew to take Areu out on a date to Del Friscos. "Who wants to take her on a date?" Hannity yelled, to her mortification, the lawsuit says.

The suit reproduces a photograph of a stash of cash and a cigarette on a studio desk which it says was the money thrown down by Hannity as part of his misogynistic ruse.

Areu also alleges in the lawsuit that in December 2018 Carlson, at the end of his Tucker Carlson Tonight show on which she had appeared, made suggestive comments to her, saying he would be staying alone in his hotel room without any wife or kids.

"Without question, Mr Carlson was probing to see whether Ms Areu was interested in a sexual relationship," the lawsuit contends, accusing the host of retaliating against the plaintiff when she declined his advances.

A separate allegation of sexual harassment is raised by Areu against Kurtz from July 2019.

In a statement released on Monday, Fox News said that it had conducted a "comprehensive independent investigation" by an outside law firm into Areu's claims against Carlson, Hannity and Kurtz and found them to be "false, patently frivolous and utterly devoid of any merit".

Fox News has been bedevilled by allegations of sexual harassment against senior male figures for years and has been repeatedly accused of operating a work culture that tolerates sexual misconduct. The late Roger Ailes was forced to resign from the channel that he created in 2016 after 23 women accused him of sexual harassment.

The lawsuit challenges the line put forward by Fox News that it has cleaned up its act since Ailes left. It says: "Fox News would have the public believe that it is a different place from the Fox News that was run by former disgraced Chairman and CEO Roger Ailes. Unfortunately, it is actually worse."