

Protest targets Penn State coach

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Gay rights activists plan a protest at MSU's women's basketball game against Penn State tonight.

It's one of several being conducted at Penn State University's Big Ten home and away games.

A federal discrimination suit filed Dec. 21 against Penn State coach Rene Portland by former player Jennifer Harris accuses the coach of discrimination based on race, gender and sexual orientation.

It alleges Portland's "discriminatory policy - known as 'no drinking, no drugs, no lesbians' - has especially targeted black players.

Harris, who is black and is not a lesbian, said Portland perceived her to be gay.

"If there is enough action around coach Portland as she and her athletes play out this season, perhaps policies both stated and unstated can be reviewed and when they are discriminatory - or allow for discrimination of some athletes - they will be changed," said Penny Gardner, program director of Michigan Equality, a statewide group opposed to discrimination.

Bill Mahon, assistant vice president for University Relations at Penn State and director of public information, said in an e-mail Wednesday that when "the allegation was made a few weeks ago that Penn State's policy had been violated by (Portland) we immediately began an investigation. That's taking place right now."

He said Portland has "strongly denied the allegation," and said she supports Penn State's policy on nondiscrimination based on sexual orientation, which has been in place for more than a decade.

Lesbians and other activists plan to wear T-shirts that say "Lavender Menace," a term used by members of the National Organization for Women in 1969 when they referred to lesbians as a public relations problem for the women's movement.

Terry Denbow, vice president of University Relations at Michigan State University, said Wednesday that university officials had met with students and "they've been made aware of the difference between dissent and disruption."

MSU senior Megan Gallagher said she wants to attend the protest "to show Portland and the university, in general, that it's homophobic behavior and unacceptable" to discriminate against gay athletes.

Gallagher said it also was important to show there is a visible lesbian presence in the university community.

The game's tipoff is at 7 p.m. at Breslin Center.