



Mining Accident News No.1021

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Thursday 15 July 2010

USA: 'Something Needs to Be Done' - Massey Mine Survivor Testifies Before Congress

Extract from www.inthesetimes.com

On July 13, the House Committee on Education and Labor held a hearing on proposed legislation to toughen mine safety. The major impetus for this legislation was the April 5 explosion at the Upper Big Branch (UBB) coal mine that killed 29 miners, the worst U.S. mining accident in the past 25 years.



Chairman and CEO of Massey Energy Company Don Blankenship (L) and International President of United Mine Workers of America Cecil Roberts testify during a hearing before a Senate subcommittee in May 2010. (Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images)

The committee heard from many luminaries including two assistant secretaries of labor, the president of the United Mine Workers of America, the general counsel of the AFL-CIO, and a distinguished professor of mining engineering, as well as representatives from mining industry groups.

But the most compelling testimony came from a UBB coal miner who was underground on the day of the explosion. Stanley "Goose" Stewart has been mining coal for 34 years and working at the UBB mine, owned by Massey Energy Company, for the last 15 years. He explained to the committee how Massey's disregard for miner safety affected him and his co-workers every day.

"I'm here to speak for my 29 brothers who did not make it out," Stewart told the committee. "This tragedy never should have happened in America today."

"Something needs to be done to stop outlaw coal companies who blatantly disregard the laws," he continued. "Many things were wrong at Upper Big Branch, such as low air constantly."

Mine inspections are supposed to be a surprise, but Stewart said that management found ways to tip off miners in advance so that they could pass their inspections. Someone on the surface

NOTE: Views expressed in this newsletter are those of the individual sender, and are not necessarily the views of Industry & Investment NSW.

would call the section boss underground and use code to alert him. "It's cloudy outside," or "There's a man on the property," were the signal to get the mine cleaned up to pass inspection.

The new law would make this kind of tipoff a felony.

Stewart said that management routinely forced the miners to work in unsafe and illegal conditions. Danger signs were apparent long before the blast, but no one would listen when miners complained. Everyone was terrified of being fired.

In the months before the April 5 blast, Stewart's section foreman complained to upper management because he was getting consistently low air readings. "He would be berated and told to go back to work or he would lose his job, and the air was never fixed," Stewart said.

Stewart said he was worried about the long wall before the blast. He felt the constant ventilation problems coupled with the large amounts of methane seeping from the rock made the area a "ticking time bomb."

"In my years of working for Massey, I feel they have taken coal mining back to the early 1990s using 3 principles; fear, intimidation, and propaganda."

Stewart described how the mine owners would game the system to make their safety statistics look good on paper: "I know personally that Massey sends a safety director to the hospital to pressure miners hurt on the job to return and sit in the office so their accident doesn't get listed as a "lost time accident."

The new law would toughen whistleblower protections for miners who expose unsafe work practices. It would also ensure that miners receive full pay for the time that the mine is closed due to safety infractions. Currently, miners only get paid for 4 hours if they're sent home early due to unsafe conditions. Stewart said that sometimes Massey doesn't even pay that much.

"A coal mine is the worst place in the world to work if you have no rights, and at Massey you had very little rights. You knew if you stood up to them, you'd be out of a job," Stewart said, "I wonder what will happen to me for speaking out now."

Friday 16 July 2010

Africa: New platinum mine safety measures could hit Aquarius output - and others too

Extract from www.mineweb.co.za

Instructions from South Africa's Mines Inspectorate following the Marikana platinum mine accident will force a number of operations to alter their mining plans.

LONDON - The issue of deaths in the South African mining sector has been brought to the forefront again by the recent fall-of-ground accident at Aquarius Platinum's flagship mechanised Marikana platinum mine, and measures now imposed on Marikana, and other similar operations, could have a sharp short to medium term impact on production. UG2 reef mines, like Marikana, are the most likely to be affected as the wider reef widths lend themselves more to this type of mining than the generally narrower Merensky reef.

With regard to Aquarius' Marikana operation itself, its No. 4 shaft area, where the accident occurred, is still shut down while investigations into the cause of the fall-of-ground continue and the company can not yet give a date when operations will be allowed to resume.

Marikana, as well as some of the other platinum mines, but not all, work on the bord (room) and pillar system leaving pillars behind as support for the working areas. Additional support between the pillars is provided by roofbolts. At the moment Aquarius mines leaving 10 m wide rooms, but the company - and others using this method of mining - have been instructed to reduce the room widths to 6 m which will require

a change in mining plan which will not be quick, or easy, to implement at short notice. The maximum permitted extraction in these areas will be 75%. While the mines will be allowed time to implement the new restrictions it is unlikely the Mines Inspectorate will allow much prevarication on the changeover. This is bound to have some impact on production.

This latest blitz on mine safety comes as, in fact, South African mine safety is improving - but the death rate is still seen as totally unacceptable - particularly in the country's gold and platinum mines. Interestingly South Africa's coal mining sector is among the world's safest. The gold and platinum mines do have particular problems because of depth-related rockbursts and groundfalls and do have extremely high labour forces - although considerably smaller than they used to be and while the number of deaths are falling, quite drastically - and are nowhere near as bad as those of say mining in China or in a number of other countries which are loath to publicise statistics.

This year, for example, deaths in the platinum mines after a little over half the year are 20% lower than at the same time a year ago - and 63% lower on all mines at this stage so the increased emphasis on safety in the industry, under pressure from the government and trade unions, is beginning to have a significant impact and will almost certainly raise mining costs.

South Africa has around 80% of the world's known platinum reserves and platinum group metals are a hugely important contributor to the country's export earnings.

USA: Former Mine Regulators Criticize MSHA Bar on UBB Photographs

Extract from PR Newswire, USA

JULIAN, W.Va., today noted that two former, high-ranking federal mining regulators, David Lauriski, former Assistant Secretary of Labor for the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), and Michael Lawless, former Deputy

Administrator of MSHA, agree that MSHA has exceeded its legal authority by barring the Company from photographing and conducting other tests at its Upper Big Branch (UBB) mine to help determine the cause of an April 5, 2010 accident.

Massey Energy wants to take its own photographs, conduct electronic mapping and take coal dust samples as part of the investigation. The two former regulators have signed declarations supporting Massey Energy in its legal action against MSHA. The legal challenge asks the Federal Mine Safety and Health Review Commission to overturn MSHA's order against Massey.

Mr. Lauriski said the prohibitions imposed by MSHA "are extraordinary and problematic," have nothing to do with miner health or safety and that in fact they exceed MSHA's authority under federal law. Also, he said, MSHA has never before imposed such restrictions on a mine operator during an accident investigation.

Massey, he said, has the right "to take photographs during such inspections and investigations [of a mine after an accident], to map a mine or an area of a mine to take dust samples and observe and/or participate in evidence testing without impeding or interfering with MSHA's inspection or investigation."

Mr. Lauriski added that, in his professional opinion, allowing Massey to take pictures, to map, and to sample coal dust would not interfere with the federal investigation — and, he noted, Massey has offered to share *all* of any information it gathers with federal investigators.

Mr. Lawless, who worked at MSHA as a regulator for more than 30 years, agreed that MSHA's prohibitions on Massey "cannot be justified by safety concerns or the current condition of the Mine."

"To my knowledge," Mr. Lawless said in his declaration, "MSHA has never imposed such wide-ranging restrictions on any mine operator during an accident investigation." In fact, he

said, MSHA accident investigation reports often incorporate pictures and electronic maps produced by the mine operator.

In previous MSHA accident investigations, Mr. Lawless said, mine operators also were allowed to take their own coal dust samples.

Shane Harvey, Vice President and General Counsel for Massey, said the willingness of two former MSHA regulators to support Massey's complaint shows just how unusual are the limits imposed on the Company by MSHA.

"For an accident as serious as UBB, the more information that can be gathered during the investigation, the better," Mr. Harvey said. "Yet, MSHA is doing what it can to limit our ability to look into an accident at one of our own mines. This isn't right. And it doesn't look good for MSHA, given that its own conduct is under investigation."

The legal filing seeking relief can be found on the Massey UBB website at www.masseyubb.com.

Massey Energy Company, headquartered in Richmond, Virginia, with operations in West Virginia, Kentucky and Virginia, is the largest coal producer in Central Appalachia and is included in the S&P 500 Index.

SOURCE: Massey Energy Company

Quote of the week



"A closed mind is a dying mind."

Edna Ferber
(USA Playwright, 1885-1968)

Sunday 18 July 2010

China coal mine accidents 'kill at least 38', trap more

Extract from BBC News, Asia-Pacific

At least 38 miners have been killed in three separate accidents in China's notoriously dangerous coal mines, according to state-run media.

Twenty eight people died after an electrical cable caught fire inside the Xiaonangou mine in Shaanxi province, the Xinhua news agency reports.

Police have arrested the mine's owner.

Eight miners died in an accident in Henan province, while two others were killed in Hunan, Xinhua says.

Thirteen miners remain trapped underground in a separate incident in Gansu province in the northwest.

Rescuers retrieved five bodies from the Shaanxi mine on Sunday morning, Xinhua said.

An investigation is currently under way.

China's vast coal mining industry is considered one of the most dangerous in the world.

According to official figures, 2,631 coal miners died in 1,616 mine accidents in China in 2009, down 18% from the previous year.

The country gets more than two-thirds of its electricity from coal.

Most accidents are blamed on failures to follow safety rules, including a lack of required ventilation or fire control equipment.

But independent labour groups say the figure could be much higher, as accidents are covered up to prevent mine closures.

This week in mining accident history

24 July 1979

Appin Colliery

Appin, New South Wales, Australia

Underground coal mine

Methane explosion

14 killed

Source: Illawarra Mercury, Aus

Appin mine blast: a day that shook our world

The night of Tuesday, July 24, 1979, shook not only the small mining community of Appin but the entire Illawarra, with the region's families dependent on their men going underground day after day.

The blast in the Australian Iron and Steel (now BHP Billiton) mine left 38 children fatherless and lives tattered.

The explosion was ignited by a rush of methane gas around 11pm in K panel, a remote tunnel of the mine about 3km underground.



The mine disaster of 1979 killed 14 men.

Ten miners died in the crib room while enjoying tea and sandwiches, and another four were found varying distances away.

The recovery involved more than 100 volunteers and it was not for 26 hours that the bodies were recovered.

Rescuers risked their own lives as they picked through twisted metal and dirt near deadly pockets of carbon monoxide and methane.

At the time of the explosion, 45 men were underground.

MP for Cunningham Sharon Bird was 16 at the time and lived at Appin Mine on "Colliery Row" with her family.

Her father was a mine official and, like the entire mining community, Ms Bird's family was hit hard emotionally.

They had lost three of their own in the Mt Kembla disaster of 1902.

"To me it's one of the reasons I'm so passionate about occupational health and safety," Ms Bird said.

"I know families whose dad didn't come home.

"Mining has meant so much for this region, but it's certainly a job with risks."

An inquiry, which took more than a year to finalise, found that the explosion occurred because of a lack of ventilation, causing a massive build up of methane in what was a notoriously gassy mine.

Gas in the starter box of a fan is believed to have triggered the explosion.

Judge Alf Goran made a number of recommendations, which led to more sophisticated checking equipment and procedures.

He also cleared all men in the mine of any blame.

United Mine Workers district check inspector Garry Horne said huge safety improvements had occurred in the three decades since the tragedy.

New technology made the assessment of risk a more scientific task.

"(A similar disaster) is far less likely," he said.

"In NSW, we have the safest mining in the world and it requires input from the Government, companies, unions and workers to keep it that way.

"Certainly the mines on the South Coast are extremely gassy ... so the potential is there if the systems in place don't work or people take shortcuts."

The Mercury led the coverage of the disaster in 1979, producing several updated additions on the morning of July 25.

"The loss suffered at Appin is no parochial tragedy," the paper said in its editorial.

"It is a national loss, all the more dramatic for the suddenness and terrifying force.

"The people of the Illawarra will feel bound to share in the ... obligation of caring for those left behind."

Wednesday 21 July 2010

Four dead, rescue continues at flooded NW China coal mine

Extract from the People's Daily Online

The death toll from a flooded coal mine in northwest China's Gansu Province has risen to four after rescuers recovered two more bodies late Tuesday.

Nine miners were still trapped at the Jijitaizi Coal Mine, in Jinta County of Jiuquan City, said Hu Zhihong, a spokesman of Jinta County Government.

The two victims were Li Caisheng, 20, and Li Yuqing, 48, both from Gansu's Gulang County, Hu said.

The flooding occurred at 11:30 a.m. Sunday when 16 miners were working underground. Three managed to escape and 13 were trapped.

The first two bodies were recovered late Monday.

Hu said rescuers were still pumping water out of the flooded shaft, and the work was expected to be completed Wednesday.

In neighboring Shaanxi Province, four officials were sacked after a coal mine fire on Saturday killed 28 at Xiaonangou coal mine, in Sangshuping Township of Hancheng City.

Chief engineer Song Shaomin, deputy chief engineer Zhang Shengwei of Hancheng City Coal Bureau, and two other department heads in

charge of coal mine safety and production were dismissed, said a spokesman of Hancheng City Government.

The mine's electro-mechanical manager, Xia Xueguo, 38, died in the fire.

Five coal mine accidents from Saturday to Monday in the provinces of Henan, Shaanxi, Hunan, Gansu and Liaoning, have left at least 46 people dead.

USA: Lockheed Martin creates device to communicate with trapped miners

Extract from The Post-Standard - Syracuse.com

Salina, NY— Lockheed Martin Corp. in Salina is developing a device that uses magnetic waves to send messages to trapped miners.

The first time it worked two years ago at Howe Cavern south of Albany it was an Alexander Graham Bell moment for engineer Dave LeVan.

He and Tom Parks were on the surface, while Chris Dolen and Jacob Benko were several hundred feet below in the cavern.

"They were getting set up down there and I was sitting waiting with the computer running. All of a sudden I saw a message pop up 'Are you guys ready to go now?' ", LeVan said. "I was very thrilled."

If their device is approved by the Mine Safety Health Administration for use in mines, it will allow miners who become trapped in an accident to communicate with rescuers.

The company expects to get approval for its MagneLink Communications System within a couple of months, said Warren Gross, the program manager.

The company has received \$570,000 in federal grants to develop the system, and says it spent much more than that on its own on research, he said.

The market for the device that could be used in any type of mine would be global, Gross said.

Lockheed Martin's Salina plant is better known for designing and making electronic warfare systems, radars and sonars. But it has a commercial side as well.

After the Sago Mine disaster in 2006, Lockheed Martin retiree Gary Smith who now lives in West Virginia contacted his former colleagues in Salina to ask if there was some technology available that could help trapped workers communicate with the surface.

The suggestion found its way to LeVan, who researched the subject.

Lockheed's team needed to overcome two challenges, he said. The device needed to penetrate deep into a mine's layers of rock and earth. It also needed to operate in an environment where a single spark could touch off methane gas explosion.

The system, which is patent pending, works much the same way a radio tower sends out radio waves to a car receiver that translates them into voice or music.

Lockheed's system uses two devices that are about the size of suitcases that send out magnetic waves, LeVan said. A miner trapped below the surface speaks into a handset or types on a keyboard. That information is transmitted by magnetic waves through the earth to a device on the surface, which translates the information back into voice or data.

Lockheed's devices capture voice down to 1,550 feet below the surface, and data down to 1,900 feet, Gross said.

During normal operations miners communicate by walkie-talkies, or by wired telephones. Those systems are likely to be destroyed or shut down if there is an explosion or accident, said Larry Grayson, a professor of mine engineering at Penn State University.

Mines are very large, and it's common for a mine to be a square 10 miles long by 10 miles

wide, with many tunnels running through it, he said.

After an explosion, rescuers can drill holes through the earth to rescue those trapped, but they don't know exactly where to look, Grayson said.

Mines are now required to set up emergency shelters throughout the tunnels that contain 96 hours of oxygen where miners can take refuge after an explosion or accident, he said. The government also requires that mines have devices that can communicate with the surface during an emergency. However, the government has yet to approve such a device, he said.

The plan is to place Lockheed's devices near those shelters so that miners can let rescuers know where they are, and rescuers can tell them help is on the way, Grayson said.

It would provide trapped miners with hope, he said.

Since 2008, Lockheed's team has been testing their devices in mines in Western Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia. Gross said the engineers have been very impressed with the suggestions that have come from people in the industry.

"Their focus was to keep this as simple to use as possible," he said.

The technology had to be uncomplicated so that someone could use it in the high stress environment that follows an accident, Gross said.

"You basically pick up the phone and talk or you tweet," he said.

Thursday 22 July 2010

SA: Family paid \$20k for mine death

Extract from Roxby Downs Sun, SA

BHP Billiton has been fined and ordered to pay compensation to the family of a worker who was killed at Olympic Dam in 2007.

The company pleaded guilty in the South Australian Industrial Court to failing to maintain a safe workplace at the mine.

Scott Rigg, a refractory coordinator working on a routine smelter shutdown, was fatally injured when a 75 kilogram fibreglass nozzle fell 14 metres and struck him while a crane operated above without Rigg's knowledge.

The company was fined \$76,000, and ordered to pay \$20,000 to Rigg's family.

In handing down his judgment, the magistrate said two activities had overlapped with tragic consequences.

The magistrate noted BHP Billiton had a safety system in place at the time of the incident.

"This is not a case where a defendant simply did not have in place systems," he said.

"In fact it did have in place a system and the system was such that if it had been adhered to the incident would not have happened."

A BHP Billiton spokesperson told The Roxby Downs Sun the company accepted the court findings.

Asked if it thought the ruling was fair, the spokesperson said: "The penalties imposed in a case like this are a matter for the courts and the Parliament of South Australia.

"It is impossible to equate any monetary sum with the tragic loss of Scott's life."

The spokesperson said BHP had prioritised raising safety standards after the accident.

"We have ensured that the lessons learned from this incident are incorporated into our health and safety programs."

SafeWork SA said the case was a sobering example of the hazards that could be encountered in the mining industry.

"This is a tragic example of what can happen when a change in procedure is not effectively communicated," SafeWork SA executive director Michele Patterson said.

USA: Mine Officials Slam Massey Claims on Ventilation

Extract from www.npr.org

WASHINGTON: Mine safety officials are painting a portrait of ineptitude and confusion by officials at Massey Energy Co. in the months before an explosion at the company's West Virginia mine killed 29 men.

The depiction — in an internal memo from a top official at the Mine Safety and Health Administration — is part of a lengthy rebuttal to Massey's claims that the government forced it to make changes that would reduce the volume of fresh air in the mine before the blast. It comes as Massey reversed itself and said data now showed there was a surge of explosive methane gas before the explosion, after earlier saying there wasn't.

A copy of the memo from deputy assistant secretary Gregory Wagner to the Labor Department's top lawyer was obtained by The Associated Press.

The memo adds to the bitter public feud that has played out between Massey and MSHA in the months since the Upper Big Branch mine tragedy in Montcoal, W.Va. Government officials have said Massey has a lax attitude toward safety, while Massey Chief Executive Don Blankenship insists he does not put profits ahead of safety.

The memo accuses Massey of making the claims about ventilation as part of a public relations strategy to deflect blame for the accident from the company. Wagner's memo states that Massey proposed in January to reduce the amount of air flowing to the working sections of the mine so it could redirect air to another area where it wanted to produce more coal.

Massey was "a company that routinely submitted plans that did not meet regulatory requirements and a company that had serious problems following its plans and managing the air flowing underground," the memo states.

Massey's conduct is the subject of state and federal investigations, as well as a criminal investigation launched by the Justice Department.

Jeff Gillenwater, a Massey spokesman, said the company "stands behind its previous statement about the role MSHA has and continues to have in the approval and changes in mine ventilation plans."

Blankenship is to address the National Press Club in Washington on Thursday. Since the accident, he has contended that MSHA imposed a plan that reduced the volume of fresh air to the face of the longwall section of the mine where the blast occurred — despite vigorous objections from Massey engineers. Mines rely on ventilation to remove methane gas and coal dust.

Massey, meanwhile, said Thursday that a new analysis of data showed there was a surge of methane gas in the mine before the blast, reversing its earlier statements that air samples shortly before the explosion didn't show high levels of explosive gases.

Massey said in a statement that an analysis of readings collected by federal investigators from the mine's exhaust fan show unusually high levels of methane inundated the mine April 5.

The company stopped short of saying the methane caused the explosion. It also did not say why the surge did not trigger methane detectors on mine equipment that warn operators and then shut the equipment off automatically when the gas is detected at levels well below its explosive range.

The company has been accused in congressional testimony and news reports of overriding methane detectors. Massey has denied doing so.

On the ventilation issue, the company has sued MSHA in federal court, alleging the agency "indirectly forces mine operators to design a ventilation plan the way MSHA wants by refusing to approve the operator's plan."

But Wagner's memo blames Massey for its "inability to properly manage the air it had and to follow its approved ventilation plan." He claims Massey had "serious problems" following its ventilation plan, resulting in MSHA citing the Upper Big Branch mine 23 times between September 2009 and April 5, 2010.

The memo says Massey submitted many changes to the plan — many of which were denied — because the company failed to provide basic information such as air flow readings that are required under the law. During one conversation in December 2009 about meeting regulatory requirements, the Massey engineer drafting the ventilation plan "remarkably" didn't even have a copy of the regulations. Wagner says MSHA later provided him a "courtesy copy."

On Jan. 7, 2010, Massey proposed to dramatically reduce the amount of air on the longwall face by using air from the existing ventilation plan to ventilate an older section of the mine, allowing it to produce more coal, the memo says. MSHA denied this request because it was not clear that the system would work as planned.

"Massey's recent professed concern with the amount of air at the longwall and on the headgate is entirely at odds with the fact that Massey proposed to reduce the volume of air in those sections," Wager states in the memo.

The memo concludes that if at any point Massey determined there was an inadequate amount of air flowing to any working section, the company was required by law to stop mining operations until the problem was solved.

"Prior to the explosion at UBB, Massey did not indicate a belief that this mine required extraordinary steps," the memo says. "Its mine ventilation plan and mine ventilation practices are not reflective of a company showing extraordinary concern about the safety of the miners working underground."

Friday 23 July 2010

NSW: Anglo American Says Four Drayton Coal Mine Staff Hospitalized After Blast

Extract from Bloomberg.com

Anglo American Plc, which operates six coal mines in Australia, stopped operations at Drayton in New South Wales for a "short period" after an accident hospitalized four workers.

Mining was stopped "in order to brief employees on the incident," which occurred at 8:15 a.m. local time, Brisbane-based spokesman Aldo Pennini said in an e-mailed response to questions. Operations have since resumed.

Drayton, 100 kilometres (62 miles) from the export port of Newcastle, produces about 5.5 million metric tons of power-station coal a year and employs about 300 workers, according to Anglo American's website. Five employees were affected by an incident during blasting, the company said in a separate statement.

Of the four treated at hospital, one has been discharged and the fifth employee has returned to work, Anglo American said. The company is treating the incident "very seriously" and cooperating with all relevant authorities.

15 trapped after Russian mine blast

Extract from the Sydney Morning Herald, Aus

An explosion in a Russian coalmine on Saturday trapped 15 miners and injured two others, officials said, adding that rescue efforts were underway, domestic news agencies reported.

"An explosion took place at 2.00am (2200 GMT, 0800 AEST) at the Krasnogorskaya mine in the Kemerovo region," about 3500 kilometres east of Moscow, a spokeswoman for the emergency situations ministry told Interfax news agency.

Sixty-seven people were working underground at the time of the blast, she said, adding that 52 had been evacuated. Two of them were hospitalised for burn injuries.

Six rescue teams had been dispatched, she added.

Initial reports said the accident appeared to be a methane gas explosion.

Deadly mine accidents are relatively common in Russia because of ageing infrastructure, violations of ventilation safety requirements and tampering with gas-level monitoring equipment.

In May, at least 66 miners and rescue workers died in methane blasts at a coalmine in southern Siberia.

The disaster was the second deadliest mining accident in Russia's post-Soviet history after a tragedy that claimed 110 lives at a different mine in the same region in 2007.

Mining dictionary

A guide to common mining terminology

W

whim

A structure of strong timber supporting a large horizontal drum around which ropes are wrapped, being attached via a poppet head to buckets or *kibbles* in a *shaft*. The drum is attached to a long beam with a horse harness at its end. As the horse walks around the drum it turns and raises one end of the rope while lowering the other. Also referred to as 'horse whims' and 'whimsies'. Intact whims are only known to survive on a very few fields, but the iron components of whims such as horse yolk and the pin and gudgeon on which the whim pivoted are more often found.



A photo of a whim gin also showing a 'corf' basket.

-Ed