



Mining Accident News No.1127

1 to 9 September 2011

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Thursday 1 September 2011

USA: Mining Accident Sends One to Hospital

Extract from www.wtov9.com/news

BENWOOD, W.Va. -- A Benwood miner is out of the hospital today, after an accident early Wednesday morning.

Consol Energy officials said the man received an electrical shock while working inside the Shoemaker Mine in Benwood.

He went to Wheeling Hospital to be looked over, and was released Wednesday afternoon.

Colombia: Down in the Dark

Extract from Earth Island Journal

Accompanying a Colombian Miner on His First Trip Underground Since an Accident Killed His Brother

BY ANNA-KATRINA GRAVGAARD AND LORENZO MORALES

Under a small icon of Jesus, surrounded by his seven children, Floresmiro Olaya gulps down a breakfast of potato broth and hot chocolate. He's going back to work today, barely six weeks after a coal mine explosion high up in the Andes mountains of Colombia killed his brother and four friends and left him the lone survivor. When she heard about the accident, Floresmiro's then-pregnant wife, Estelle, went into shock and gave birth prematurely. The infant, who has not yet been named, is lying on a blanket on his parents' bed. He lets out a wail. Floresmiro's oldest child, Michael, picks him up. The father watches.

"The first thing I did when I woke up this morning was to ask God to protect me," he tells us.

Floresmiro is a jovial 34-year-old, nearly six feet tall, with round, freckled cheeks. Today he's dressed in grey overalls, jeans jacket, and yellow rubber boots with newspapers wrapped around his feet instead of socks. All the miners wear newspapers around their feet, which they change during lunch break, to keep their feet dry. As we walk out into the cold, misty spring morning, he talks about the accident at the La Escondida mine near the small town of Sutatausa in Cundinamarca district. With every day that passes he remembers new details about the February tragedy.

Floresmiro was halfway down the mine when the blast occurred and the impact threw him clear of the mineshaft. Mine inspectors later said that the explosion was caused by accumulated gases. The molehill-like mine, one of several illegal

NOTE: Views expressed in this newsletter are those of the individual sender, and are not necessarily the views of the NSW Department of Trade and Investment, Regional Infrastructure and Services
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mines that pockmark the Peñas del Boquerón mountainside, lacked proper ventilation, collapse shelters, and other safety precautions. Floresmiro says it had never been inspected before the accident.

After the explosion blocked the entrance to the mine, locals heard a bell ringing inside, the same one that miners use to signal that the coal cart is loaded and ready to be pulled up the mine shaft. There were survivors down there. Floresmiro imagines it was his brother pulling the string. He imagines him surrounded by dead comrades, slowly suffocating in the darkness.

The rescue team turned up two hours later. The “rescuers” didn’t have adequate equipment to dig through the rubble. “People here say they came to fetch the dead, not to save the wounded,” Floresmiro says. “In the hours it took them to get here, lives could have been saved.”

Floresmiro is one of the rare survivors of such lethal accidents. He was hospitalized for several weeks with burns across his chest, headaches, and numbness. Every day, his wife came to comfort him as he wept over the loss of his brother and friends.

When we accompany Floresmiro to the cemetery in Sutatausa where three of the five killed in the La Escondida blast are buried, he’s visibly moved. The victims lie next to each other in a vertical shelving system that resembles a beehive. Their names and dates are hand-painted on the cement – awaiting a time when the families can afford a stone plaque. It’s the first time Floresmiro has been to the cemetery since the accident. He had visited Sutatausa twice earlier, but couldn’t bring himself to come see the graves.

“It hurt so much and sometimes I think that when five could die, why not six?” he says. “It would be better not to wake up to this reality but to have gone with them. I pray to God for my children.... And thank God after all for being alive and to have been given a second chance.”

Actually, the La Escondida accident wasn’t Floresmiro’s first brush with death. Five years ago he survived a similar explosion and lost another brother in a mining accident.

The fact is, mining accidents like these are increasingly common in Colombia these days.

Little Oversight

As the price of coal and minerals soars, the Colombian mining industry has been digging deeper and faster to bring cheap energy to world markets, especially the US and China. Between 2002 and 2010, areas with mining titles skyrocketed from 2.8 million acres to 21 million, according to government figures. Today, Colombia is South America’s largest exporter of coal. The rock comprises 25 percent of the country’s exports, and Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos has put mining at the heart of the country’s economic strategy. However, Colombia still lacks clear legal frameworks and well-financed environmental institutions to monitor and regulate an industry that can pose lethal risks to workers, neighbouring communities, and the environment.



photo Lorenzo Morales

Although the nation’s mining industry is dominated by big multinationals with massive strip-mining operations in the north of the country, Columbia also has many small-scale, largely unregulated mines scattered in the western and eastern mountain chains. In these mines, coal is extracted from shafts up to 600 meters deep. The mines operate with few safeguards or equipment to measure the accumulation of explosive gases underground. Which means miners like Floresmiro work under

extremely dangerous, and often deadly, conditions.

Last year, 173 miners were killed in 80 mining accidents – three times more than the year before. In the country's worst mining tragedy in recent years, an explosion at the San Fernando mine in the northwestern town of Amaga in June 2010 trapped 163 miners underground and resulted in the death of 73 men. Following the tragedy, then-president Alvaro Uribe announced immediate mining sector reforms.

But little changed in the following months. Accidents continued. The February 2011 Sutatausa blast in which Floresmiro lost his brother occurred a mere week after another methane-explosion killed 21 miners in a coal mine in Sardinata in northeast Colombia. And more recently, on June 13, five miners, including a pregnant woman, died when a gold mine collapsed in Lopez de Micay, Cauca, in southwest Colombia. So far this year, at least 37 miners have died in accidents, according to official figures.

Again, the government – a new one this time, run by President Santos – expressed outrage. In February, it announced “strict measures” to ensure safety in the mines. The reforms were to take effect immediately. But progress has been slow due to the country's obsolete, ill-equipped, and often corrupt mining and environmental institutions.

At the time of the Sutatausa accident, only 16 government inspectors (and some other 50 outsourced personnel) were in charge of safety enforcement at the more than 6,000 mines throughout Colombia. This figure counts only the legal mines that report to Ingeominas, the Colombian Institute of Geology and Mining, which is in charge of overseeing safety regulations and granting mining titles. The government estimates that another 3,000 illegal mines are scattered in 18 of the country's 32 provinces.

Since February, mining authorities claim to have inspected 524 mines in three provinces. The inspectors reported that 73 percent of the mines were operating under unsafe conditions. They shut down 303 mines temporarily and permanently closed 21.

Meanwhile, Ingeominas is embroiled in its own corruption scandal involving its approval of mining concessions. In June, press reports revealed corruption rings within Ingeominas that had led to a “feast” of mining licenses being granted to individuals and multinational companies without the mandatory requirements being met. The mining fever spawned a black market for these titles, which were being sold at exorbitant prices to big investors and mining companies. A recent article in *El Tiempo*, the national newspaper, identified the “czars of mining titles” – a couple who have been granted, in record time, 12 mining titles that they have already sold to third parties. They are now requesting 500 more titles. Some of these mine titles can be sold for \$100 million.

More than 20 public officials, including former Ingeominas director Mario Ballesteros, are being investigated by the Colombian attorney general.

President Santos, who has been severely critical of Ingeominas, is proposing setting up a new mining-regulatory agency. The hope is that the new agency will look into both mining safety and environmental threats posed by this rapidly expanding industry.

But while a new mining body might help better regulate big, multinational mining companies, overseeing small-scale mines is going to be much tougher.

Part of the problem is that small-scale mining, or what some experts call “folk-mining,” is a colonial era heritage in Colombia. During the late sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries, the area that is now Colombia supplied most of the gold produced in the Spanish colonies. And most of this gold was extracted from small mines by peasant miners.

For many villagers in the Colombian countryside, this kind of mining is a traditional occupation handed down from father to son. The growing demand for minerals and poor miners' need for income (Floresmiro earns about \$60 a day, six times more than the minimum wage), have led to a proliferation of these small mines, making them especially difficult to regulate. For every illegal mine that's closed down, another pops up elsewhere.

Another danger is the increasing involvement of armed rebel groups that are moving from the country's contested coca fields to exploiting gold, platinum, and rare earth minerals to finance their activities. It has become difficult to tell small-scale miners moved by need from those attracted by greed and violence. The government is attempting to tackle this by involving the police and the army in monitoring the mines, which, in turn, is provoking unrest in many mining regions.

In January, more than 5,000 peasants marched to the town of Anorí, Antioquia, to protest military operations against gold mining and coca cultivation. In neighboring countries – such as Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador – a similar policy has led to violent clashes between miners and police squads. Sending in the troops has not been a smart way to build confidence with local mining communities.

Back Down Under

Back in Sutatausa, Floresmiro has no choice but to take up mining again. He has a family to feed. The only other job he can get is with a local flower company that would pay him \$10.50 a day.

Floresmiro hopes that his children will find a different career. But to be a miner is a sort of family inheritance in this region. Floresmiro was eight when he went into the mines with his father, Guillermo, who's now in his eighties. The old man is proud to have worked most of the 100 or so mines that started here in his lifetime. "I have worked in these mines from when I got

my teeth and until I lost them," he likes to say. Floresmiro will probably tread the same path. And it seems his kids are following his footsteps too. The mines are their playgrounds. Every afternoon after school, they tour nearby mineshafts to fill bags with coal and bring some back home to heat their stove.

The Escondida mine was shut down after the accident. So Floresmiro's friends have helped him line up a new job at a bigger mine called La Fortaleza (The Fortress) further down the mountain. He's going to work as a "door builder" – the person in charge of securing the mine's internal structure. The mine is "legal" in the sense that the mine owner has a "permit" from Ingeominas, but doesn't have all the paperwork in order to operate legally. With some difficulty, we have been allowed to accompany Floresmiro on his first trip into the mine.



Photo Anna-Katrina Gravggaard. With seven children to feed, Floresmiro Olaya has no choice but to return to the mines.

On our way to Floresmiro's new gig, we pass the abandoned La Escondida and several adjacent mines that have also been shut down.

The landscape here has changed radically since his childhood, Floresmiro tells us. Where there are now piles of coal, there used to be fields of wheat, rye, potato, and corn. The mines are taking over the countryside. It saddens him that he has to go to the market in town to pick up the food that once grew right outside his family's house. "All of these small mines are being replaced by larger mines," Floresmiro says. Along with the larger mines come lower wages

and harder labor and more environmental destruction. "In them there is more exploitation," he says.

At La Fortaleza, everyone is wearing brand new safety equipment – helmets, overalls, gloves, and boots. The miners tell us that the equipment has been lying around for a while, but has been put to use in our honour. Jexcencia Corredor, a young, female security officer, makes sure that everyone signs for the equipment and reminds the miners to follow security rules. It's around 11 a.m. The previous shift, which started working at 7 a.m., has left for lunch.

We approach the 40-year-old shaft that runs 400 meters deep into the mountain. Floresmiro leans against the entrance and takes a deep breath. Corredor is already four meters into the mine. She turns and squints towards Floresmiro, who is still standing at the opening, summoning his courage.

"Are you afraid?" she asks.

"No, not scared, but you must understand that it is hard to come back," he replies. It's especially hard because Floresmiro feels guilty. He thinks others resent him for having survived the blast that killed their loved ones. He crosses himself and begins descending into the depths. We follow, walking along the rail tracks that carry the coal carts. Soon we can no longer see the opening to the outside.

As we go deeper, the shaft gets narrower. Our helmets often hit the low ceiling of the tunnel, which is just big enough for the coal cart to pass through. In some places, the wood from the supporting arches seems rotten; elsewhere arches are missing altogether. "These poles need to be replaced," Floresmiro tells Corredor, knocking on them to test their stability. Fortunately the mountain is solid and the stone supports the mine for now.

It is humid. Floresmiro pats the stone on the sides of the shaft. When his headlight hits the rock, the coal reflects a cold, white light. Soon the air becomes thinner and colder. We sit down

for a moment, some 300 meters deep into the mountain. "How much oxygen is here?" Floresmiro asks. Corredor shows him the measuring instrument. It displays: 20.8. "There you see, there is plenty," he says with a smile.

We descend to the very bottom of the pit where one of the miners, Dario Castiblanco, is at work crumbling the rock with his pick. Castiblanco also lost a brother in the La Escondida accident, and has not seen Floresmiro since then. Floresmiro greets him: "I'm really sorry, my brother. It is hard to bear." Castiblanco nods. The men put their arms around each other.

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USA: Man Dies after Coal Mining Accident in Wyoming

Extract from Kowb, USA

A man is dead after an accident at one of Wyoming's largest coal mines.

According to State Mine Inspector Terry Adcock, the accident occurred on Thursday, September 1 at the North Antelope Rochelle Mine in the Powder River Basin of Peabody Powder River Mining LLC where a contract worker of Weston Engineering died after being struck by a wrench during the drilling of a water well at the surface mine.

The victim was identified as Cody Alwin Brown, from Spearfish, South Dakota, a 29 year old contractor at the coal mine.

This is the second fatal accident at a Wyoming workplace in the last week. On Monday, three workers were killed in an explosion at a Wyoming oilfield.

As of yet, no further information regarding the accident has been released.

Pike River families to see footage

Extract from nzherald.co.nz

Harrowing footage showing the 29 Pike River men entering the mine for their last time before the fatal explosion is to be shown to family members, who were last night told to brace for one last look at their loved ones.

Ten months after the November 19 blast, a family member was made aware of the footage, taken by a camera trained on the mine portal. They contacted lawyer Nicholas Davidson QC, who secured it from the police.



An excavator removes gravel and shotcrete from the seal at the Pike River mine. Photo / supplied

Families were told about the footage at a "highly emotional" meeting last night, five days out from the next phase of the Royal Commission hearings in Greymouth.

The families' lawyers were to watch it this morning to assess how traumatic it would be, before showing it to the families. The police have told them some individuals can clearly be identified entering the tunnel in the transporter, called a drift runner.

Some families have asked to watch it alone, others in a group, and the lawyers were this morning attempting to arrange support for them. They were also grappling with how to show families overseas.

Mr Davidson said the families were "utterly devastated" when told last night.

He thought the footage may have been withheld until now because it would upset people too much, but as a lawyer he believed he had to disclose everything to them.

There were several different entries on November 19 as the coal miners and contractors headed underground.

"They get to look at them again ... it is highly unusual to get to see someone just before they died," Mr Davidson said.

"They're about to relive it all in phase two (of the Royal Commission), now they can see their men."

Families' spokesman Bernie Monk said there were a lot of tears last night when everyone heard about the footage of their loved ones.

"They are only 2.5km away and we can't get to them. It's bringing the stress and frustration to the fore. They are only that small distance away, and we can't touch them."

A police spokeswoman said the existence of camera footage showing movements in and out of the mine had never been a secret.

Counsel for the families asked police for a copy of the footage showing the men entering the mine on their last shift.

"The footage was supplied the day after the request was made, with the proviso that the viewing needed to be sensitively handled given what happened within the mine during the shift.

"Family members may find this footage of their loved ones very emotional and distressing."

Friday 2 September 2011

USA: Loveridge No. 22 Mine Incident Sends One to the Hospital

Extract from The State Journal, W.V, USA

State officials are investigating the incident.

MORGANTOWN -- A mining accident sent one man to Ruby Memorial Hospital for surgery Thursday evening.

According to the West Virginia office of Miners Health Safety and Training, it happened around 6:30 p.m. Thursday at the Consolidation Coal Company (Loveridge No. 22) Miracle Run Portal.

A locomotive jumped the track at the mine's #3 spur and struck one man in the leg, a spokesman said. The agency is not releasing the man's name at this time, but it is investigating the incident.

Sunday 4 September 2011

Ten dead in China mine accident

Extract from Xinhua

The bodies of 10 miners have been pulled from a flooded mine in China's south-western province of Sichuan, state media reported on Saturday, adding two more remain trapped underground.

Rescuers are trying to reach the pair, who have been trapped since the mine shaft in the city of Dazhou flooded on Monday when 30 miners were working underground, Xinhua said quoting local authorities.

Eighteen miners escaped the flood.

The mine's owner and the manager in charge of safety have been arrested, the report said citing a spokesman.

Monday 5 September 2011

Pike River mine electrician feared worst

Extract from The Age, Vic, Aus

The sight of a man lying face up in the mine tunnel just two metres in front of his vehicle confirmed the worst fears of a Pike River coal mine electrician.

There had been an explosion in the mine.

Mattheus Johannes Strydom had driven into the mine to investigate the complete outage of power and communications on November 19, 2010.

He told the Royal Commission into the Pike River Coal Mine tragedy at Greymouth District Court on Monday that he believed the man lying face up on the ground was dead.

However, miner Russell Smith later regained his breath and was helped out by the only other survivor Daniel Rockhouse.

Mr Strydom told the commission that on November 19 last year, when 29 men died in the underground mine near Greymouth about 3.44pm, he was told power and communications had gone at the mine.

He was concerned as the battery backup should have kept the communications system going and he had a bad feeling.

In South Africa there had been six incidents of methane explosions, and in all cases both power and communications had gone.

"Each and every time, that was what happened," he said.

He said he went into the mine, because he felt people were depending on him and it was important to get the ventilation system going again.

He entered at 4.07pm and was worried there were no lights, and the one metre red and white PVC reflector strips were not there.

"Something didn't feel right," he said.

The commission heard that Mr Strydom was not wearing a breathing aid and his gas alarm was for carbon dioxide and not methane, the explosive gas that is found in coal.

When he left the mine he tried to use a phone but the container where it was housed was locked.

The royal commission continues.

This week in mining accident history

6 September 1869

Avondale Colliery

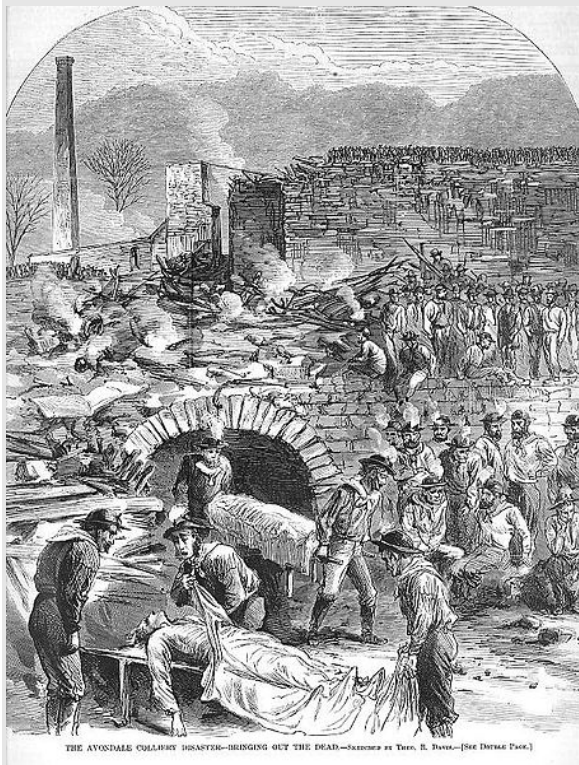
Plymouth, Pennsylvania, USA

Underground coal mine

110 killed, fire

Source: en.wikipedia.org

The **Avondale Mine Disaster** was a massive fire in the Avondale Colliery in Plymouth, Pennsylvania, United States on September 6, 1869. It caused the death of 110 workers, making it one of the largest mining disasters of Pennsylvania history. It started when a wooden coal breaker machine built over the Steuben Shaft entrance to the underground mine caught fire. This shaft was the only entrance to the mine, and so the fire trapped and suffocated the workers. Among those who died were five boys ages 12 to 17, as well as two volunteers who suffocated while they were attempting a rescue.



One of the first global relief efforts occurred after the disaster, with donations for the families of victims arriving from all over the world. Another result of the fire was the enacting by the

Pennsylvania General Assembly of legislation establishing safety regulations for the coal mining industry, making Pennsylvania the first state to enact such legislation. These laws mandated, among other things, that there must be at least two entrances to underground mines. The disaster also caused thousands of miners to join the Workingmen's Benevolent Association, one of the first unions to represent coal miners in the United States. Continuing labor and social strife in the Pennsylvania anthracite coal fields resulted in an increase of the activities of the "Molly Maguires", a controversial organization that conducted violent attacks against anthracite coal mine operators. These conflicts eventually resulted in the trial and execution of twenty members of the Molly Maguires in Pottsville and Mauch Chunk.

The fire

During the morning of September 6, 1869, the coal breaker atop Steuben Shaft at the Avondale Colliery caught fire. Later investigators concluded that the furnace was the source of ignition, with flames traveling up the wood-reinforced shaft and engulfing the entire wooden structure up to the headhouse, 60 feet above the headframe. However, not everyone has accepted this theory, so spontaneous combustion, ethnic conflict between Welsh and Irish workers, and industrial espionage have also been considered possible causes. The entire inside day shift was trapped underground.

The flames grew rapidly, quickly setting most of the surrounding wooden structures afire. James M. Corrigan, the writer of a research paper on the incident, described it as such: "Imagine a plane of fire running up at an angle of about thirty-three degrees toward the hill above, and after it has accomplished that distance, see it shoot up in one immense column into the air, while dense clouds of smoke envelope all surrounding objects, and the reader can have a faint idea of the spectacle."

The inquest

On Saturday, September 11th 1869, a Coroner's inquest concerning the cause of the death of the victims of the disaster began at Shupp's Hall, Plymouth. The inquest had to deal with a crushing irony: The nascent anthracite miners' union, The Workingmen's Benevolent Association (WBA, initiated 1868 by John Siney), had successfully petitioned the Pennsylvania State Legislature for the passage of a new mine safety act, which became law on April 12. The law codified ventilation requirements and stipulated the presence of a second entrance, in accord with contemporary British practice. This act did not apply to mines in Luzerne County, due to the efforts of George Turner, the Democratic state senator from Luzerne County.

Miners, foremen, mine union (WBA) representatives, mining experts, and representatives of the mine owners (Delaware, Lackawanna & Western Railroad) testified. Contention emerged concerning the fire's origin. Management intimated arson:

Henry J. Phillips, Mining engineer for D. L. & W. R.R.

Question. Have you any idea where the fire originated?

Answer. I thought first from the furnace; afterward....I think it [the shaft] was set on fire.

Other testimony from Welsh miners cited ethnic tension between Welsh and Irish miners, union-nonunion worker conflict, or labor-management conflict resulting from the earlier strike. Further testimony revealed the lack of firefighting equipment in the mine. Much testimony centered around the lack of a second exit and absence of deep mine air shafts, unsafe storage of combustibles, and a history of fires. Although the preponderance of testimony supported the conclusion that a second exit or air source removed from the main shaft would have saved the trapped miners, Company testimony was equivocal and misleading:

James Archibold, Chief Engineer of D. L. & W. R.R. and stockholder.

Question. Do you consider it safe to have a mine with only one opening?

Answer. I consider it relative no more danger getting on a railway train and riding one hundred miles than working in that mine.

The position of the union was made dramatically clear by representative Henry Evans:

In answer to a question from Mr. H. W. Evans, [an unidentified] witness said, "That seems intended to bring out a condemnation of the system of mining with but one outlet; I fully agree in condemning that system."

Mr. Evans said, "That is exactly the intention. We miners intend to prove here who is responsible for that system. We intend to prove that it is wrong - WRONG - to send men to work in such mines, and that we have known it for long years; but we must work or starve; that is where the miners stand on this question, and we mean to use this occasion to prove it."

Mr. Evans spoke with intense excitement and feeling, and his words drew a burst of applause from the miners in the audience.

Coroner Waldham reminded the audience that this was a court room; and that order and decorum must be preserved. The repetition of such remarks or demonstrations would make it necessary to clear the court room at once and exclude all spectators thereafter.

After deliberation, the Jury delivered its verdict:

An inquisition at Plymouth, in the County of Luzerne, the eighth, ninth, eleventh, and fourteenth days of September, in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and sixty-nine,...do say upon their oaths that...The cause of death of Palmer Steele [a miner] and other people sustained was the exhaustion of atmospheric air and the presence of the abundance of carbonic acid gasses in the said Avondale mines, caused by the burning of the Head House and Breaker at said mine, on the

sixth day of September 1869, destroying the air courses leading from the mine through the shaft.

That the fire originated from the furnace in the mine, taking effect on the wood brattice to the up-cast air course leading from the bottom of the shaft to the Head House.

The jury regards the present system of mining in a large number of cases now working by shaft as insecure and unsafe to the miner, and would strongly recommend, in all cases where practicable, two places for ingress and egress and a more practical means of ventilation, thereby rendering greater security to the life of the miner under any similar accident.

Tuesday 6 September 2011

USA: Safety rule eyed for mine machine

Extract from courier-journal.com, USA

Proximity sensor might save lives

WASHINGTON — Bobby Smith Jr. was an experienced miner, with 12 years in the industry, but on June 24, 2010, he was killed when he was pinned by a mining machine he was operating in Perry County.



Mine operator Dallen McFarland, right, inspects the teeth of a continuous mining machine at the Horizon Coal Mine outside Helper, Utah. A private measure of U.S. manufacturing activity grew in October, 2009, at the fastest pace in more than three years, helped by government spending and higher demand from overseas. The better-than-expected reading is a positive signal for the fledgling economic recovery. / (AP Photo/George Frey, file)

Smith, 29, was cleaning up loose coal on the floor of Leeco Inc.'s No. 68 mine, using what is known as a continuous-mining machine. Operating the machine by remote control, he got

caught between the equipment and the mine wall and suffered fatal injuries.

Smith's was one of two deaths in 2010, along with one so far this year, in which miners were struck, crushed or pinned by continuous-mining machines. Since 1984, 31 miners have been killed and 220 injured in such accidents, according to the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration.

Now MSHA is proposing a new rule requiring that the machines — which by one estimate are used in 45 percent of underground U.S. coal production — carry devices to detect the presence of miners or other equipment and shut off when they are dangerously close.

Such technology, called proximity-detection systems, could have prevented a death like Smith's, the agency said.

"The time to act is now to fix this problem," MSHA chief Joseph Main said in an interview. "It absolutely can be done, and we need to do this to protect miners."

The agency is proposing a system that would use an audible or visual warning signal when miners or equipment are within five feet of a continuous-mining machine. The machine would stop if the distance closed to three feet.

MSHA already has approved three proximity-detection systems for use in U.S. mines, and at least 35 continuous-mining machines now have them. At least seven mines in Kentucky are using proximity-warning systems, according to MSHA.

Continuous-mining machines have a large, rotating steel drum with large teeth that scrape coal from seams at fast as five tons per minute. The machines are moved from place to place as the coal is mined.

In addition, there are larger, slower versions — called "full-face" machines — that are not moved as much. The proposed rule would not apply to them because, MSHA said, they do not present

as great a hazard as the machines that regularly change position.

The agency said there are about 1,150 mobile continuous-mining machines in use in about 424 underground coal mines nationwide. Kentucky has 307 continuous miners, according to MSHA.

The cost of the detection systems to the industry would be about \$36 million, MSHA said. Coal company revenues totaled about \$18.5 billion in 2009.

MSHA estimated that about \$10 million annually would be saved from preventing fatalities and injuries after the third year of the new rule.

"This is going to have an impact," Main said.

The National Mining Association is looking at the rule's time frame for compliance, spokesman Luke Popovich said.

The coal industry launched a voluntary safety program two years ago that focused on the dangers of underground machinery, he said in an email.

"But generally we support the emphasis here and will see how the proposal can lead to actual safety improvements," he said.

The United Mine Workers union also is reviewing the proposed rule, spokesman Phil Smith said.

"But we do support installing proximity-detection systems. They save lives," he said in an email.

Tony Opegard, a Lexington attorney who is a former state and federal mine regulator, said proximity-warning systems are another advance in improving mine safety.

"This rule is aimed not just at preventing fatalities but also preventing horrific injuries as well," Opegard said.

The agency plans to hold three public hearings on the proposed rule in October. They will be in Washington, Pa.; Charleston, W.Va.; and Denver. Public comments must be received by Nov. 14.

"We plan to move expeditiously," Main said.

MSHA anticipates requiring the proximity-detection systems on machines three to 18 months after the publication of the final rule, depending on when the continuous-miners were manufactured.

Miners regularly face the hazard of being pinned or crushed by mining machines because they often work in confined spaces where visibility is poor, space around the machines is limited and mine floors may be slippery, uneven and strewn with debris, MSHA said.

Since 2004, federal mine regulators have been trying to increase industry awareness.

"MSHA's outreach efforts included webcasts, special alerts, videos, bulletins, and inspector-to-miner instruction," the agency said in The Federal Register. "Despite these efforts, pinning, crushing, and striking accidents still occur."

MSHA's investigation into the Perry County accident determined that the coal operator did not check to determine that miners were following its roof-control plan, which required the miners to be a safe distance from the machine and away from potential "pinch points" where they could be trapped.

The agency cited the mine for failing to ensure compliance with the roof-control plan.

Leeco developed and carried out miner training and safety awareness programs. In January, the company installed a proximity-detection system on one of its continuous-mining machines, and MSHA said it has accepted a company plan to install similar systems on other new or rebuilt machines.

Pike River survivor twice delayed from entering mine

Extract from nzherald.co.nz

The second survivor of the Pike River Mine disaster - miner Russell Smith - has revealed that he was twice delayed from entering the mine in the hours before the blast.

The Royal Commission of Inquiry sitting in Greymouth, after a request from media, released Mr Smith's evidence. Although he has been present in court this week, he did not speak to his brief.

In a factual statement, he says he was late for work on November 19, and when he did arrive he was told to take a loader underground. He had to put on a new bucket, but was again delayed because he could not get the pins out.

As he was driving in, what may have been a bright light caught his attention, followed by "a concussion".

"I recall feeling that pressure on my face, just bang! It was just all noise and concussion on me straight away."

Still sitting in the loader, he tried to hide low behind its steel door.

"I remember fighting for breath and was worried that it was gas."

He tried to reach his self-rescuer, but then his memory goes blank. He does not believe he had time to get it on.

His next memory is vomiting in the ambulance, and in hospital, the smell of smoke lingered in his hair.

Mr Smith does not pass judgment in his statement, but he does note the tag system had become "fairly inefficient".

Confusion in the mine

Former general manager Doug White, giving evidence to the Royal Commission of Inquiry in Greymouth earlier today, painted a picture of confusion over who was actually in charge immediately after the November 19 blast and who was underground at the time, as they repeatedly rang phones which no one answered.

There was disagreement over whether to run the conveyor and when to bring in a machine to suck the air out, with the Department of Labour and police in Wellington categorically ruling out those options.

Running the GAG machine, to prevent further explosions, was an acknowledgement the 29 men were dead because once it was running no one could breathe underground, he said.

On the night of the blast, Mr White debated with individual Mines Rescue staff who were frustrated they could not enter the mine. However, Mines Rescue did not make a formal request to go underground until the following Wednesday, he said.

The self-rescuers, fastened to the belts of everyone underground, had 30 minutes of oxygen, and the fresh air base had 50-minute ones.

Every half hour, mine staff opened the intercom system so anyone alive inside the mine would have been able to hear them speak. All phones were called. Only one did not ring; it returned static.

They urgently needed to know what gas levels were underground, and lowering a hand-held monitor on the end of a fishing line down the ventilation shaft was considered, but ruled out as people would still have to enter the fan house.

The fishing rod idea has been heavily criticised by other submitters.

"The fishing rod was my fly rod - (but) it would have put a person at particular risk (without breathing apparatus at the top of the shaft)."

Instead, St John suggested a stomach pump from an ambulance be lowered down the shaft, which sucked a sample from about 40m down.

Mr White said they had to think outside the square. Mines Rescue also lowered a radio down in a bucket, with a lamp.

Gas samples flown to the Mines Rescue station at Rapahoe for analysis indicated there had been a fire underground.

Meanwhile, staff were struggling to determine who was actually trapped underground. Some

name tags had not been removed from the board, while others had not placed their tags.

A temporary seal at the portal was discussed by Mr White and Mines Rescue to reduce air flow, but the Department of Labour refused: "It was not up for discussion."

Police Superintendent Gary Knowles of Nelson became incident controller but there were no direct conversations about who was in charge, Mr White said.

There were initially frustrating delays as decisions had to be approved by people in Wellington.

Mr White wanted to run the conveyor to determine how damaged it was further in the mine. If it worked, the blast may not have been too large, but he was told he could disturb evidence.

He disagreed with the decision not to bring in the GAG machine on November 22 and was proved right "as the mine exploded a further three times before the GAG was deployed".

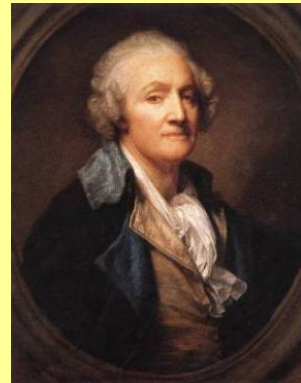
On November 24, he was called and told Mines Rescue was preparing to deploy. He then got a second call, and was told the mine had again exploded. They determined no one could still be alive.

The next day he was shown an image from inside the mine. It showed one open self-rescuer box, which suggested someone may have survived the first blast. He asked people not disclose the image until further analysis had been done.

"I had a sinking feeling ..."

The hearing continues.

Quote of the week



"As soon as you trust yourself, you will know how to live."

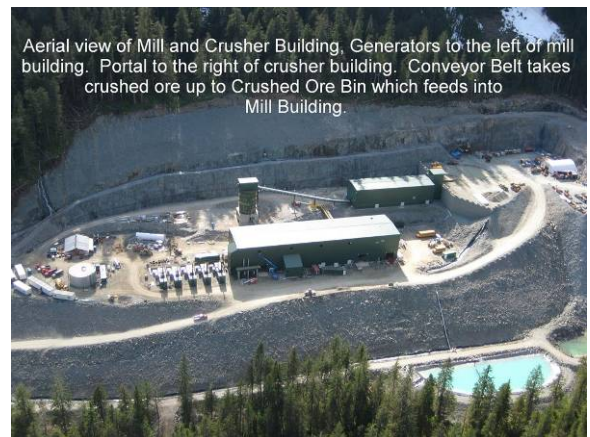
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
(German dramatist, poet & scientist; 1749-1832)

Wednesday 7 September 2011

Coeur Alaska Reports Accident Fatality at Kensington Mine

Extract from Business Wire

JUNEAU, Alaska -- Coeur Alaska reported today that a fatality took place at the Kensington gold mine this morning.



Aerial view of Mill and Crusher Building. Generators to the left of mill building. Portal to the right of crusher building. Conveyor Belt takes crushed ore up to Crushed Ore Bin which feeds into Mill Building.

The miner's name is being withheld at this time pending notification of family. Appropriate emergency response agencies have been notified.

Coeur Alaska is investigating the accident and will provide more information to the community as it becomes available.

The Kensington gold mine is an underground operation with surface process facilities located 45 miles northwest of Juneau.

Pike River: Fresh air haven not working

Extract from nzherald.co.nz

Pike River Coal mine did not have a purpose-built fresh air safety haven operating on the day of the explosion that killed 29 men last year.

The statutory mine manager, Doug White, has told the royal commission into the November 19 disaster at the West Coast underground mine a fresh air base 1500 metres into the mine had been decommissioned several weeks before the explosion.



Douglas White told the Royal Commission there a fresh airbase was decommissioned in the weeks before the explosion. Pool photo / The Press

Two miners struggling for survival, Daniel Rockhouse and Russell Smith, had been advised to go to the fresh air base when they phoned for help from further in the mine.

When they got there, they discovered there was no air and no working phone in the base.

Mr White has told the hearing at Greymouth District Court that he believed the 1500m base still had air and a working phone, but he knew the self-rescue breathing apparatus had been removed.

He agreed that removing the self-rescuers was a premature action when asked by counsel for the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union, Nigel Hampton QC.

However, he said he was not made aware every time a phone was moved and there were many reasons the compressed air was not available.

While a new air base had been set up where air entered the mine down a slimline shaft, it was not purpose built, Mr White said.

At the time of the explosion a purpose-built air base was to have been built in a matter of weeks by excavating, kitting it out with airlock doors, tables and using the equipment there in a more organised way, he said.

He agreed with Mr Hampton that the "de facto fresh air base" would be reliant on the mine ventilation system and barometric pressure to ensure air kept coming in.

The hearing continues.

Pike River manager criticised planned escape exit

Extract from nzherald.co.nz

Pike River safety and training manager Neville Rockhouse, who lost a son in the West Coast coal mine disaster, tried to stop the main ventilation shaft being made an escape exit and when staff attempted the ascent, they became too exhausted to make it to the top.

Mr Rockhouse was on site when the November 19 blast happened.

He helped his son Daniel after he staggered out of the portal. Another son, Ben, died in the disaster.



Pike River miner Ben Rockhouse's father did not realise he was missing until four hours after the blast. Photo / supplied

Mr Rockhouse said the decision to make the ventilation shaft a second escape exit was very contentious. After phase one of the Royal Commission into the explosion, mine chief executive Peter Whittall told the Campbell Live television programme that Mr Rockhouse had deemed it satisfactory for a second escape route.

"I totally refute that statement ...I was always concerned," Mr Rockhouse said.

He said he did everything he could to prevent it being declared the official second escape.

"At no time did I ever accept this as being a satisfactory means of exit from the mine in any type of emergency situation."

The second escape way was to let technicians access the main fan when bad weather prevented helicopters from reaching it. He understood a new, second egress was to go out to the west.

Then, he said, things went wrong: Part of the main ventilation shaft collapsed, mine manager Kobus Low resigned. Then they hit a stone graben, and the tunnel headed north.

About this time, it was ruled the ventilation shaft was to become the second escapeway. He was excluded from the meetings when this decision was made, and could not say who made it.

"It was a very strenuous climb. Once I found out about this plan, I proactively began to fight against it."

It had no mechanical hoist to pull injured people. There was a 50m vertical ladder with no platforms, which at one stage leaned back. A static wire rope and harnesses would instead be used. Only eight sets were purchased as it was originally intended for maintenance.

If there was a fire or explosion, miners would not be able to climb 50m up an incline, then up another 50m ladder. He said he told all department heads of his concerns. "You did not send people to a bottleneck in an emergency," he said.

At shift change, there could be up to 60 people underground. The ladder could take eight.

A year before the blast, four people were to test the ascent. The first two were so exhausted that no one else even wanted to try. Neither made it as far as the surface.

Mr Rockhouse said he tried to convince Mr Whittall to buy a refuge station.

With no official sign-off on the second escape exit, other safety measures were delayed, including smokelines to navigate to safety in a smoke-filled tunnel.

Mr Rockhouse said that in late 2009, he asked Mr Whittall if he could train the management team on the emergency system. Mr Whittall refused and said he was comfortable with the company's ability to respond.

Earlier today, footage of the second massive explosion on Tuesday, November 23 was shown in court. It later emerged that an army robot weighing 300kg was blown 100m.

On the Wednesday there was a third, smaller blast and on the Friday, one week on, a fourth, similar one. It dislodged part of a surface fan 'avasy' weighing 6-7 tonnes, by 3-4m.

Flames indicated a fire in the shaft, or from the bottom of the shift, where there was coal.

Commissioner Stewart Bell said it seemed odd there had been no prohibition notices issued in the life of the mine, over six or seven years.

The hearing continues.

Pike manager more concerned with rescuers' safety

Extract from nzherald.co.nz



The portal seal is removed from the Pike River mine. Photo / Supplied

The person in charge at Pike River mine when it exploded is standing by his decision not to allow rescuers into the mine, saying he was not prepared to risk another life.

There has been criticism that a rescue attempt was not launched soon after the gas explosion inside the mine last November 19 that led to the deaths of 29 workers - though it is still not clear if any of the workers survived that initial blast.

Spokesman for the victims' families Bernie Monk said: "I know a lot of [mine rescuers] wanted to go in. If it was me, I would have gone in."

Pike River Coal general manager Doug White yesterday told the royal commission of inquiry into the tragedy that although some members of the Mines Rescue Service debated with him out of frustration at not being able to enter the mine, he made it clear no one was to enter.

"This was because I could not be satisfied that it was safe to do so ... I was not prepared to risk another life."

Gas sampling was done to evaluate the possibility of mounting a rescue.

When rescuers were preparing to go underground on November 24, Mr White said he got a call informing him of a second explosion.

He said there had been discussion about using a temporary seal to restrict air flow into the mine, or a GAG jet engine machine to render the mine atmosphere inert, but these were rejected because authorities felt it would send a message there was no hope left of the workers surviving.

Mr White spoke to survivor Daniel Rockhouse by phone after the explosion and told him to stay low and get out.

Concern has also been raised about the delay in contacting families of the workers left in the mine. Mr White said it took time to account for the people underground because some of them had not placed their tags on a tag board as they were supposed to, while some from a previous shift had not removed their tags from the board after leaving the mine.

He said New Zealand mining regulations were set at a lower standard than he was used to in Queensland. In his time at Pike he had had to terminate an employee for a serious safety breach, but his approach was generally to encourage people to act safely "rather than take the big stick".

Thursday 8 September 2011

Pike River bosses accused of failing to plan for explosion

Extract from nzherald.co.nz

Company bosses have been accused of failing to plan for a deadly explosion at the Pike River mine during an inquiry into the November disaster.

Mine safety and training manager Neville Rockhouse, who lost his son Ben Rockhouse in a series of explosions at the mine, is giving evidence to a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the disaster at Greymouth.

He came under heated questioning from Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing union counsel Nigel Hampton over safety concerns at Pike River.

Mr Hampton said company management had not taken steps to ensure a fresh air base in the mine would work after an explosion.

He asked Mr Rockhouse why he did not know the exact number of self-rescuers at the fresh air base.

"Nobody wrote into these plans the possibility that an explosion might occur. That's the reality... isn't it?"

Mr Hampton accused Pike River Coal management of saying "nobody expected this mine to blow up and therefore we didn't plan for that occurrence."

Mr Rockhouse said the fresh air base had been designed for a fire making the mine atmosphere unbreathable, rather than an explosion.

Management had not expected the mine to explode, he said.

But he rejected the accusation the company had not put a focus on safety and said the possibility had been considered in mine planning.

Earlier, Mr Rockhouse said he had "always" been concerned over a ventilation shaft being used as a second exit from the Pike River mine.

He said he did everything he could to prevent it being declared the official second escape.

"At no time did I ever accept this as being a satisfactory means of exit from the mine in any type of emergency situation."

Pike River Coal (in receivership) counsel Stacey Shortall this afternoon questioned that account.

She pointed to company documents that did not indicate Mr Rockhouse had objected to the shaft being named as a second mine exit.

He said he had always disagreed with the decision to make it a second exit - but had been overruled by company management.

The inquiry has now adjourned for lunch.

Friday 9 September 2011

Pike River 'body' image shown

Extract from stuff.co.nz

An image appearing to show a body lying in the Pike River mine has been shown during an inquiry into the disaster.

The royal commission of inquiry is looking into the November 2010 disaster, in which 29 men were killed.

The image is suppressed.

The image was taken from a scan of the mine on November 24 via a shaft into the mine.

It also shows one of the self-rescue boxes kept in the mine has an open lid.

A body appears to be lying in front of the self-rescue box.

The scans were taken by Solid Energy employee John Taylor, just before the second explosion on November 24.

Glennville Stiles, a Pike River contractor, told the inquiry today he last audited the Pike River mine on November 12 last year.

The lid of the box was closed when he was last in the mine, he said.

Further scan footage taken in January shows areas of the mine, including the roof, had collapsed.

The January scans show mining equipment is still intact in the mine, including piping, and a wooden pallet.

Large areas of the mine's structure appeared unaffected by the mine's blast, Taylor said.

Taylor also told the inquiry of his near miss at the mine on November 24.

The crew who scanned the mine had narrowly missed being close to the shaft when the mine blew up for the second time.

Taylor heard a "huge roar" and the crew fled down the hillside at the mine site. The explosion caused massive damage at the location the crew were working.

The crew had not been warned of the dangerous levels of gas in the mine, although people monitoring the mine knew gas levels were rising prior to the second blast, he said.

Mining dictionary

A guide to coal mining terminology

B

BACK OVER

Rail siding or set of prints where normal direction of travel has to be reversed to enter.

-Ed