



Mining Accident News No.1133

26 November to 1 December 2011

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Saturday 26 November 2011

Pike River: failures on all fronts

Extract from nzherald.co.nz

With the inquiry into the West Coast mining disaster well into the "what happened" phase, Geoff Cumming looks at what's been heard so far

A tragedy like Pike River throws up few good guys. None of the parties connected with the mine disaster can hope to emerge untainted from the Royal Commission now in the third of its four-phase inquiry.

There is a way to go, a mass of testimony to muddy the waters before the three commissioners make sense of what happened and recommend reforms.



Flames burn out of control from a ventilation shaft at the Pike River Mine in November last year. Photo: Getty Images

But it's clear there will be no winners among the parties closest to the disaster: Pike River Coal, the regulations the company worked under, the state servants who policed the mine safety rules and those who led the emergency response.

In the current "what happened" phase of the inquiry, evidence of the company's failings is mounting - but nor do the light-handed regulatory regime or the Labour Department inspectorate look good.

Yet good will come if lessons are learned - leading to better mine safety rules and procedures, more rigorous regulatory oversight and resourcing and improved emergency response. That much is clear from the testimony so far.

Were project economics and the company's expectations an issue?

Development costs had blown out from an estimated \$29.3 million in May 1995 to \$350m by mid-2010 and production was well below target. Testimony suggests miners were under pressure to increase production and safety issues were given lesser priority.

The company's expectations of the mine, its research and experience were questioned at the start of the inquiry by Don Elder, chief executive of state-owned Solid Energy, an experienced West Coast mine operator. Elder claimed Pike had inadequate knowledge of its coal seam and

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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relied on overseas consultants with little knowledge of the West Coast's complex geology. "Fundamentally, this is all about the geology."

Potential safety risks arose from the difficult geological conditions, the [hydraulic] mining method and prolonged financial pressure because of years of production delays.

Whittall has disputed that delays and finances had any impact on operating safety.

What safety challenges did geology and the mining method present?

Pike was known as a "gassy" mine. Methane could leak into gaps in the unstable Hawera Fault, near the coal seam, and the presence of sandstone raised the risk that trapped methane pockets could be released by drilling.

Coal was to be extracted using hydraulic equipment - water blasted at very high pressure to carve coal from the seam. But this has the potential to release large volumes of methane.

Hydraulic extraction was still in the commissioning phase, but there was a cluster of methane spikes in October.

This week, hydro-mining expert Masaoki Nishioka said Pike began hydro-mining in an unsafe place in the mine. The method of sealing off the goaf (the cavity left after coal is extracted), meant a "huge methane gas pocket" could be left. (The commission believes the goaf was the most likely source of methane that fuelled the explosion).

Nishioka feared the mine would explode at any time, but management was pushing to increase production. He said he told Whittall and mine manager Doug White to "not send anybody underground" until a robust ventilation system was in place and a second escapeway provided. When he tried to find out about ventilation, he was brushed off. He was relieved to leave at the end of his three-month contract in October.

Lawyers for Whittall and White say both deny they were warned the miners were in danger.

What might have caused the gas to ignite?

There is a risk of spontaneous combustion with different types of coal. An underground ventilation fan has been identified as a potential ignition source. Mine consultant David Stewart said there had been previous "frictional ignition" incidents, caused by sparks from the road header machine hitting quartzite sandstone. Another risk was miners smoking - a cigarette lighter and butts had been found in the mine.

How did the company address the geological and gas risks?

Geologist Jane Newman raised concerns about the company's lack of geological research. She was not confident the company understood there was sandstone within the coal seam near where the miners were working. She recommended extra drillholes, research and training but these were not enacted due to finances.

Solid Energy's underground mines manager Craig Smith said complex ventilation design was needed to manage methane but the company was trying to extract coal without fully understanding the conditions or investing in necessary equipment.

Former chief mines inspector Harry Bell, whose nephew Allan Dixon died in the mine, was engaged there in 2006 and 2007. He recommended fans be installed and piping used to remove gas but nothing was done. He became "furious and alarmed" in December 2008 when told there had been 10 gas ignitions and he told the Labour Dept mines inspector the mine should be closed until ventilation was improved.

Bell said the original mine plan stated two tunnels would be drilled through the Hawera fault for ventilation and he was shocked to learn only a single egress would go ahead. He would not have allowed tunnelling through the fault with only one entry to the mine.

The ventilation system was too slow and unable to deal with methane.

A 2009 report found a gas pipeline and other equipment were insufficient to drain methane from the coal seam. It raised concerns about minimal data on gas content, high methane volumes and poor workforce knowledge.

Health and safety manager Neville Rockhouse, whose son Daniel survived the blast, said the company had never planned for an explosion. The mine's safety plans allowed for a fire but simply did not consider that it might explode.

There were initial mechanical problems with the underground ventilation fan which began operating weeks before the explosion and it was not flame proof.

The company had not employed a ventilation officer, despite Pike being a gassy mine.

Did skills or recruitment problems play a part?

Peter Whittall has admitted the experience and competence of staff were a concern. (He wrote in 2005 of the need to recruit overseas and the higher rates of pay available in Australian mines). The company had six different mine managers in two years, three operations managers in 18 months and five technical managers in five years.

A review for the Labour Dept found the company "failed miserably" in its training of contractors.

This week, hydro-mining coordinator George Mason said he had no experience in the hydro coal extraction method and felt out of his depth. The Australian had a 12-year break before rejoining the industry in 2007.

Consultant David Stewart concluded the high turnover of managers had compromised the mine and the mix of inexperienced miners from New Zealand, Australia and South Africa added to the "apparent dysfunctional nature of the organisation and communication".

What other design safety issues have been highlighted?

David Stewart, chairman of the Mines Rescue Service Trust, made 14 audits of the mine early

last year as a consultant. He told of problems with the main ventilation fan's equipment and positioning; lack of remote gas monitoring sensors; uncontrolled gas drainage discharge, and a risk of vehicles damaging gas drainage pipes.

Use of a type of concrete instead of steel joists to support the unstable Hawera fault area is alleged to have increased the risk of a rockfall.

A second exit - required by regulations - had been mentioned since 2005 but was never developed. Instead, the company relied on the 108m high ventilation shaft - which included a 55m vertical ladder - for emergency escape.

An audit in 2009 found escape capability an area of serious concern and said escape via the shaft would be "virtually impossible" in a fire.

Miners raised concerns about the shaft with Labour Dept inspector Kevin Poynter in April 2010. Poynter said it could only be climbed with severe difficulty, especially if miners had donned breathing apparatus, and was unsuitable as an escape route. This should have been given the highest priority by the company.

The company believed a fresh air base [a modified shipping container with emergency equipment] was a better option than constructing a secondary exit. The mine tunnel was the primary means of escape.

What else has been heard about the company's safety management and procedures?

The fresh air base had been decommissioned ahead of being moved. When Daniel Rockhouse, one of only two miners to escape the mine, reached the base he found no first-aid kit or breathing apparatus. The emergency phone which was supposed to go directly to the control room instead went to an answering machine. Rockhouse tried another number and got mine general manager Doug White.

Other testimony revealed phones and machinery cutoff switches were not working.

Records list other health and safety failings including the discovery of cigarette butts and a lighter in the mine, faulty gear and methane spikes which were not reported, despite being notifiable.

Two mine deputies were fired for safety breaches leading up to the disaster.

Peter Whittall said he was not aware of any trial evacuation being done using the ventilation shaft.

Dr Kathleen Callaghan, director of the human factors group at the Auckland Medical School, told the inquiry staff kept finding hazards over a significant period of time. "What I don't understand is why they kept repeating."

Whittall said no staff had raised safety concerns with him before the explosion. He said in July the company took "every conceivable step and employed every available consultant" to provide the best possible safety advice.

Why didn't Labour Dept inspectors do anything - eg: act on calls to close the mine until ventilation improved?

Mines inspectors were never shown log books which recorded soaring methane levels and gas sensors that had allegedly been tampered with. Last week, former inspector Kevin Poynter was presented with a long list of incidents but said it was the first time he had seen them. The company never told him of a cluster of methane spikes in October last year, even though they were notifiable events.

Poynter said he made 7 inspections at Pike River over 2-and-a half years. "I'm there on my own, trying to do the whole lot ...

"[Pike River] are the ones in control of the workplace, not the inspectors," he said to applause from families in the public gallery.

Inspector Michael Firmin was unaware the ventilation fan was not flameproof.

How might the regulatory environment have contributed to the lax safety standards?

New South Wales mines rescue manager Seamus Devlin said he doubted an underground mine like Pike River would be approved in Australia without two designated escapeways.

Former chief mines inspector Robin Hughes traced the origins of the disaster to the 1993 repeal of the Coal Mines Act and a weakened mines inspectorate under the Dept of Labour. Inspections became less frequent and knowledge decreased.

Previously, a large mine like Pike River would have been visited weekly and would have to submit six-monthly plans. The inspectorate group was ditched in 1999 to save \$1 million.

Former chief mines inspector Harry Bell said the law changes brought a loss of institutional knowledge.

Last week, the inquiry heard mines inspectors were not trained on underground mining laws.

Mine safety expert Dave Feickert said managers and the men were "really left on their own by the legislative process."

Labour Dept workplace health and safety policy manager James Murphy said New Zealand lacked a code of practice for underground coal mining. The department currently employed only one underground mine inspector (after the second inspector had resigned) compared to seven in 1998.

The remaining inspector, Michael Firmin, said he and former colleague Kevin Poynter had often raised concerns about the number of inspectors and high workload. A third inspector who retired in July 2009 had not been replaced. Ideally, four were needed.

Even the company had called for more mine inspectors - in a 2008 submission to DoL over improving hazard management.

What failings have been found in the emergency response and communications?

Police were criticised for failing to engage with the Mines Rescue Service and local experts who understood underground explosions and

ventilation. Mines Rescue believed none of the miners would have survived more than 30 minutes after the first blast. But police maintained hope because two had walked out and the company advised that the mine had additional self rescuers and a fresh air base with an air supply.

The Queensland Mines Rescue team who flew in after the disaster threatened to go home because they were left in the dark over monitoring. They believed the police and Pike River management had no control or management of the mine sealing and recovery aspects.

It took Superintendent Gary Knowles more than eight hours to arrive on site and communications broke down. None of the 17 people working directly underneath him had mining expertise.

Within a day of the explosion, Mines Rescue, the Fire Service and Solid Energy believed a fire was blazing underground but Knowles said he did not realise there was a fire "to that extent."

Peter Whittall told families the men could be sitting around an air pipe waiting to be rescued. Relatives learned about the fire only after the second explosion. At that meeting, Whittall first told them there would be a rescue attempt before police told them of the second explosion.

Whittall said in September he told the meeting that Mines Rescue had been going to enter the mine but people did not pick up on the past tense and started cheering and clapping.

He didn't know until the inquiry that the mine was burning after the first explosion or that film of the first blast existed.

Pike River: 'at some stage it was going to collapse'

Extract from nzherald.co.nz

The very last person to see the coal face deep inside the Pike River Mine told the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Thursday "at some stage it was going to collapse".

Former monitor deputy Stephen Wylie had done hydro mining at Solid Energy's Spring Creek underground mine, near Greymouth, but was moved to a similar position at Pike River without training - or even applying for the post, the Royal Commission of Inquiry was told.

He was on the shift before the November 19 explosion, and was the last person to view the area being mined by high-pressure water.

The commission regards the hydro monitor being used to cut the coal as its 'prime suspect' for causing the explosion that killed 29 men. It is considering whether a collapse at the coal face had pushed a wave of explosive gases through the mine.

Mr Wylie's crew was far less experienced than the incoming shift, who all lost their lives - Peter O'Neill, Allan Dixon and Richard Valli.

"I noticed nothing in the goaf that was any different (the day of the disaster)," Mr Wylie told the hearing.

Methane levels were low, and there were no unusual smells or sounds.

The goaf - the cavity left by mining coal - was up to 9m high that night. Somewhere in the back, there would have been 100 per cent methane, he said.

"At some stage it was going to collapse."

However, the coal left holding the roof up was very hard and it was unlikely the incoming crew would disturb the goaf.

Mr Wylie finished work at 8am on November 19.

There was never enough time at shift changeover, and his boss was arranging a meeting about this at the time of the explosion.

"If there is an explosion somewhere else in the mine and you are able to put your rescuer on, what would you do?" families lawyer Richard Raymond asked.

Mr Wylie said he had no particular training, but would have headed to the box of self-rescuers, and then made his way out.

He became monitor deputy in October 2010, eight months after joining Pike River as an 'out-bye' deputy.

He transferred there without any training: "I didn't apply for the position, and I was just told. I managed the situation as best I could."

His trainee Craig Reyland had worked for Chris Yeats Builders and had no face mining experience.

Mr Wylie had to leave the hydro area to do gas checks, but would "zip" back as soon as possible.

He would relieve the operator, who was sitting in the cold wind just pulling levers for a whole 12-hour shift. The person could get complacent, whereas at Spring Creek staff alternated hourly.

It took three days to take out a piece of coal that the continuous monitor would have done in an hour.

"It was well known we weren't producing anything, we just carried on it wasn't looking real flash."

He was working in the early hours of October 30, when there was a large rockfall in the mine.

The stump which had been holding up the roof beforehand was like a "44-gallon drum holding up the AMI Stadium roof".

He was concerned at the lack of a second escapeway, and thought more stone dusting (covering the roadways to reduce the risk of explosion) could be done in some areas, something he kept reporting.

The Royal Commission will resume on December 5, when it will look at the management of the company, and its contractors.

Sunday 27 November 2011

Three arrested for coal mine blast that killed 29 in central China

Extract from Xinhua News Agency

Three people who were believed to be responsible for a deadly coal mine blast in central China's Hunan Province late October were arrested Sunday. The three people were in charge of safety, production and overall management of the state-owned mine.

Rwanda: Miners Not Dead - Mayor

Extract from allAfrica.com

Muhanga — Seven miners who had been feared dead were rescued from a cassiterite mine that collapsed on Thursday, the Mayor of Muhanga, Yvonne Mutakwasuku, has said.

This newspaper had erroneously reported in yesterday's issue, the version that had confirmed the deaths.

"Four of them managed to escape immediately after the collapse, and the other three were rescued with the help of residents and a rescue team" said Mutakwasuku yesterday.

The accident happened in Rusovu cell, Nyarusange sector, on Thursday at 2 p.m as miners working for Rwanda Rudimik mining company were going about their work.

The Mayor attributed the accident to lack of professional tools and equipment which provide safety for the miners.

"This accident could have been prevented if this company had been using better tools and safety measures for their employees. Unfortunately, they still use artisan tools," said the Mayor

This week in mining accident history

28 November 1908

Rachel and Agnes Mine

Marianna, Pennsylvania, USA

Underground coal mine

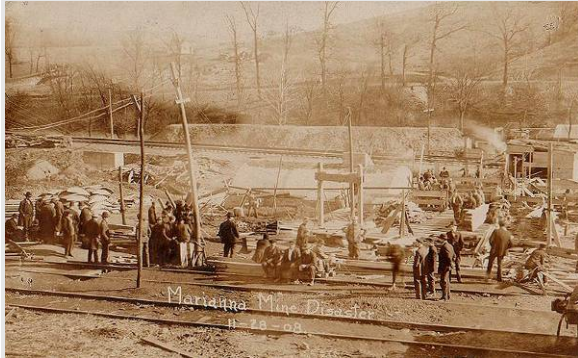
154 killed, methane and dust explosions

Source: www.usmra.com

The disaster occurred about 10:45 on Monday morning. All employees in the mine were killed but one.

As the fan casing was destroyed and the top of the outlet shaft and headframe badly wrecked, it was several hours before ventilation could be partly restored.

By Wednesday morning all the bodies had been removed, except those covered by the debris and water.



The mine was badly wrecked, stoppings destroyed, timbers dislodged and roof fallen.

Ventilation was more than ample. All stoppings and overcasts were of brick or concrete, and the workings were ventilated by six separate air splits with brattice cloth used to conduct air from the last open crosscut to the faces.

Explosive gas is generated in the mine which is worked generally with open lights.

Much fine dust was produced in cutting, blasting, and hauling. A water system was used but was ineffective to thoroughly wet the dust.

A blown-out shot in the face of No. 3 Blanche entry was the initial point of the explosion, igniting dust and gas. A secondary explosion occurred in the main dip entries where an accumulation of gas had been found and men removed shortly before the disaster.

A committee of experienced mining engineer made an investigation and report at the request of the chief mining inspector. Their findings agreed with those of the State mine inspectors and included some conclusions and recommendations regarding the control of explosion hazards that were repeated hundreds of times in the next 30 or more years.

"We feel that it should be recognized that mines liberating gas and producing dust have to face the danger of ignition from three principal causes: open lights, blown-out shots, and electric sparks. To reduce these dangers to a minimum, without forcing conditions that would sacrifice the value of property, should be the aim of our future laws. We feel that the danger of open lights can be more easily eliminated than the other two, and we do not believe it is a hardship to enforce the use of improved safety lamps in any or all mines that have given off or are apt to give off explosive gas.

It is a recognized necessity that in mining the Pittsburgh coal, other means than hand-pick mining must be employed. It can be blasted under proper regulations with a minimum amount of danger. To do this we feel that it is necessary that competent shot firers be employed who shall have charge of, and be responsible not only for the firing of the shot, but for the quantity and quality of the explosives used; that all holes be tamped with clay; that the shot firers use only permissible explosives as furnished by the company; that all shots be fired by an electric battery; and that blasting for the complete safety of the miners be done only between shifts, when men are out of the mine.

We recognize at the present time that one of the most dangerous conditions at any mine is the accumulation of dust. To prepare and take care of it is a serious problem, and we cannot but recommend that the same care as used in the Marianna mine for distributing water for saturating the dust be employed in every mine under like conditions. We also feel that it is not simply a question of the sprinkling of the dust, but it should be a saturation; that unless the coal dust is saturated, the sprinkling does not accomplish the purpose. We also feel that in all mines where machines are used for undercutting the coal, the accumulations of fine coal and dust should be loaded out of the mine before shooting.

We recognize the present estimated commercial value of the use of electricity in mines, but we

can only recommend its use in intake air currents, believing there is sufficient power otherwise attainable to do the necessary work as economically; and in eliminating electricity from all gaseous parts of the mine we remove as great a danger as the open light.

The miner should realize his importance as a factor in not only safeguarding his own life, but those of his fellow-employees by faithfully following rules and regulations prescribed, and his education should be first on these lines; that the employer and employee working together for mutual protection under intelligent guidance will reduce liability to accident by explosion by removing the causes.

We realize that to follow out on these lines of our recommendations may mean increased costs of operating expenses, and hardships might result between competitive fields unless similar laws are enforced in all such fields."

The chief mine inspector gave thought to the recognized fact that disastrous explosions were occurring with alarming frequency in mines that were deemed to be models of safe planning and management. His conclusions approached but did not stress the fact that both State and company officials neglected to train and supervise the practices of mines and coal loaders.

His summary declared:

"It is regretted that explosions of this kind cannot be entirely prevented, but while that is impossible they could be greatly reduced in number if all the persons concerned in mining would cooperate intelligently in their work.

Personal responsibility enters largely into this matter, for it is known and has often been demonstrated that the oversight, neglect and carelessness of one person in a mine may cause the death of hundreds of others.

This uncertainty is always present, and often when we think a mine, such as the Marianna, is safe, someone becomes heedless of the rules

and regardless of consequences, and as a result an explosion occurs.

Nor is it always the ignorant foreigner who is the culprit; frequently the most intelligent miner, overconfident regarding the safety of the mine, is the one to bring on disaster. It is very evident, however, that it is the plain duty of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to teach the foreign miners the language of the country and how to mine coal with safety to themselves and to others."

Monday 28 November 2011

7 killed illegally mining rare earths in China

Extract from MSN.com

BEIJING - China says seven men were killed while they were trying to illegally mine the rare earth minerals used in many high-tech products.

The official Xinhua News Agency said their bodies were recovered Monday from where they had been buried in a landslide Saturday in the country's rugged southern region of Guangxi.

The landslide happened after the men poured chemical solutions into holes dug into a hillside in hopes of extracting the elements.

Rare earths are a group of 17 minerals used to make flat-screen TVs, mobile phones, batteries for electric cars, wind turbines and weaponry.

China accounts for 97 percent of global production of rare earths. It has tightened controls over their extraction to shore up prices and prevent environmental damage, but illegal mining continues.

USA: MSHA not catching 'scofflaw violators,' report says

Extract from Charleston Gazette

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Investigators from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Inspector General have found that federal regulators are not identifying "scofflaw violators" who don't pay mine safety and health fines, allowing those

mine operators to avoid debt-collection lawsuits or other enforcement actions.

The department's Mine Safety and Health Administration "does not have an accurate view" of the amount of delinquent fines it is owed or when the violations that drew those fines were committed, according to the Inspector General's report.

"We continue to view MSHA's debt delinquency information as unreliable," the IG said in a 34-page report issued Nov. 18.

The report on MSHA fines comes just seven weeks after another IG investigation found that agency officials publicly overstated their rate for completing required inspections of non-coal mines.

And the IG's latest findings show continuing problems with MSHA's enforcement practices, following the agency's admission in 2008 that it allowed the industry to avoid required monetary penalties for 5,000 safety violations dating back more than a decade.

MSHA chief Joe Main complained that the IG report did not provide a balanced portrayal of his agency's efforts regarding civil penalty assessments and collections.

"I note that the findings ... do not identify MSHA noncompliance with federal statutes or requirements," Main said in an Oct. 17 memo. "Rather, the recommendations refer to modifications of, or adherence to, MSHA internal policies and procedures that in some cases exceed federal requirements."

IG investigators examined MSHA's record collecting fines that were finalized in 2009 and 2010, and found that agency officials had collected 85 percent of the \$147 million in penalties.

But MSHA did not always apply collected fines to the account of specific mine operators, or to the particular violations that drew the penalties in the first place.

"If payments did not include sufficient information to determine which penalty the payment was for, MSHA delayed payment application until it gathered the needed information," the IG report said. "As a result, violator debt balances were not up to date and MSHA could not be certain of the delinquency status of individual violator debts."

MSHA wanted to avoid starting debt-collection proceedings for mine operators who had actually paid their fines, but for whom the agency was not able to match payments with fines that were due.

So, MSHA officials in February 2008 created an "Exclusion List." Mine operators on it would not face debt-collection or other enforcement actions for unpaid fines "because of uncertainty caused by unapplied payments."

MSHA officials assured IG investigators that companies on the list were only those that "routinely paid their civil penalties timely."

As of September 2010, MSHA had told IG investigators that the list included penalty cases totaling more than \$8 million associated with 133 companies. In all, the "Exclusion List" included 325 mine operators, the IG report said in a footnote.

The exclusion list was created while Richard Stickler was head of MSHA, but Main defended the list in a letter to the Inspector General.

"The Exclusion List has served the purpose of not referring debt to Treasury for which payments have been received, but not yet applied, a significant savings in time and administrative costs for Treasurer, MSHA, and most importantly, the companies that have paid civil penalties that are pending payment application," Main said.

But the IG report said, "MSHA's use of the Exclusion List did nothing to address its problem of not applying payments timely. Instead, it created inconsistent and unfair practices by treating selected violators differently from other violators."

IG investigators warned that MSHA is not catching violators who don't pay their fines, because the agency has never finalized a May 2009 proposal on how to do so.

Using MSHA's proposed policy, IG investigators were able to identify three "scofflaw violators" that MSHA had not previously identified on its own. As of September 30, 2010, these three violators owed a total of nearly \$850,000 in unpaid fines, the IG said.

"Without clearly defined policies and procedures to identify all potential scofflaw violators, violators may continue to operate while ignoring the financial consequences and the deterrent that civil penalties are intended to provide," the IG report said.

IG investigators also found that, in each of the 150 cases they examined, MSHA wrote off fines as un-collectable without first complying with agency rules for making such determinations.

"As a result, MSHA lacked assurance that it wrote off only debt that was truly un-collectable and that appropriate tax liabilities were recorded for forgiven debt," the IG report said.

IG investigators also revisited MSHA's failure to assess required fines for nearly 5,000 violations cited between 1995 and 2006. MSHA officials blamed the problem on poor management oversight, a lack of staff training, and a heavier workload.

The IG found that agency officials were only able to go back and issue fines for 134 of those old violations. Agency officials have been able to collect only \$61,000 of the \$143,000 in fines issued in those cases.

NZ: Neville Rockhouse back before Pike River commission

Extract from Otago Daily Times, NZ

The father of two men - one who died in the Pike River mine explosions and the other who survived - will appear before Royal Commission into the tragedy again next week.

Neville Rockhouse was Pike River Coal's safety and training manager. Son Daniel was one of only two men to make it out of the mine after the first blast on November 19, 2010. Son Ben, 21, was one of 29 men to die in the tragedy.

Neville Rockhouse told the Royal Commission in September that Daniel had not warned him the coalmine was unsafe as he did not want to damage his father's career.

He was not aware of the concerns until after the explosions.

"My son and I had a rather large argument over it because I was very upset that there were unsafe acts and unsafe practices occurring underground and he didn't come and tell me or felt peer-pressured not to do that," Mr Rockhouse said.

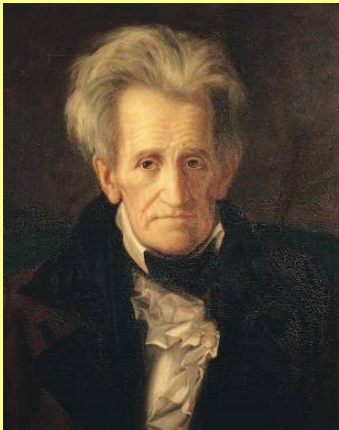
"I said, 'Bugger the career, go to the cops and tell the truth; just tell everything you know, otherwise we don't learn from it. Otherwise I've lost a son, you've lost a brother and 28 families have lost people for nothing. We have to learn from this'."

The December hearings, the third phase of the inquiry and which start next Thursday, will examine the role of Pike River Coal Ltd's board of directors in relation to health and safety, and the health and safety systems and safety culture at the mine.

Other witnesses scheduled to appear are former Pike River Coal chairman John Dow, former Pike River Coal safety training co-ordinator Adrian Couchman and McConnell Dowell former leading hand Albert Houlden.

The commission has allocated until December 16 for these hearings, with phase three resuming on February 7.

Quote of the week



“Any man worth his salt will stick up for what he believes right, but it takes a slightly better man to acknowledge instantly and without reservation that he is in error.”

Andrew Jackson
7th American President (1767-1845)

Tuesday 29 November 2011

6 Killed in Coal Mine Accident in E China

Extract from Xinhua

Six miners were killed and another seriously injured in a coal mine accident in east China's Jiangxi province Tuesday morning, local authorities said.

The accident happened at about 8:30 a.m. at the privately-run Xinshan Coal Mine in Ouli township in the city of Xinyu, when a lift loaded with seven miners malfunctioned and fell to the bottom of the mine pit.

A rescue team rushed to the site immediately. The injured miner was sent to the local hospital and is said to be in a stable condition now.

The cause of the accident is under investigation.

NZ: Pike River management to take stand at inquiry

Extract from NewstalkZB, Auckland, NZ

Four witnesses will take the stand on Monday as phase three of the Royal Commission continues.

The December hearings will look at the role of Pike River Coal management, with regards to

health and safety systems and how they operated and the safety culture at the mine.



Witnesses to appear are former Pike River Coal Chairman John Dow; the company's former Safety and Training Manager Neville Rockhouse and Pike River's Safety Training Coordinator Adrian Couchman.

The former leading hand for McConnell McDowell Limited - Albert Houlden is also called to the witness stand when hearings begin again on Monday.

Wednesday 30 November 2011

NZ: Deadly gas threatens Huntly miners

Extract from Waikato Times, NZ

Workers say a Pike River-level disaster has been narrowly avoided in the Waikato after an explosive level of gas was detected at the Huntly East Coal Mine.

An experienced miner, who wishes to remain anonymous to protect his job, says the Huntly East Coal Mine is a "time bomb" after explosive levels of gas were found while 40 men were working underground earlier this month.

"It was a Pike River ready to go," he said.

But Solid Energy – who own the mine – are downplaying the seriousness of what they say was a single event.

Communications manager Vicki Blyth confirmed "higher than normal methane levels" were

detected in an area of the mine on November 11 due to a geological fault, but she said that was "not unusual with underground mining".



"TIME BOMB": Huntly East Mine, where Solid Energy is downplaying the seriousness of what the company says was a single event. Photo: Bruce Mercer/Fairfax NZ

"We implemented our standard procedures," she said. Those procedures involved the staff being "stood down" to work in another area of the mine while an auxiliary fan was used to ventilate the area at a slow and steady rate.

She said an internal investigation had been launched into the matter.

The Labour Department have also confirmed they are investigating an incident at the mine.

"As we are investigating the incident there is no other comment we can make," a spokeswoman said.

But workers at the mine have grave concerns about the mine's safety.

An experienced miner said the methane levels in the Huntly East mine built up to a potentially explosive 5 per cent in the area men were working.

A Royal Inquiry into the Pike River explosion – that killed 29 men last year – has revealed methane levels spiked to between 1.5 per cent to 2.5 per cent of air inside the mine two weeks before the first deadly explosion.

The miner said a methane level of 2 per cent was enough to evacuate, and "bleeding" or venting of the mine happened when levels hit 3 or 4 per cent.

A methane level between 5 per cent and 15 per cent combined with oxygen and an ignition source would spark an explosion.

"It's serious. It's a time bomb."

He blamed a lack of experience among management at the mine for the incident.

"All the experienced section managers have gone to Australia. The managers have less and less experience."

Mrs Blyth also confirmed a "different matter" involving Huntly East Coal Mine employees was being investigated, but would not elaborate further due to the investigation.

The Waikato Times understands the incident – on November 15 – involves two shift managers, one a senior manager with 40 years of experience, and the other an experienced trainee manager. The two managers are understood to have, on two separate occasions, flicked a switch from automatic lock position into a bypass position, something which is usually only done if a machine breaks down.

Mrs Blyth said she did not believe the staffs' actions could have led to a gas explosion.

But the Huntly East miner, who also spoke on the condition of anonymity, said only three things were needed in a mine for an explosion to take place – an ignition source, oxygen, and methane levels between five and 15 per cent.

He said 40 miners were inside the mine on November 15, and it was only the lack of an ignition source that prevented an explosion.

He said the Huntly East Coal mine has a gas analysis system that is more advanced than Pike River but it does not mean that the staff are any safer.

The miner's concern was heightened by the fact several of the men in the mine at the time of the incident were mine rescue brigade men, meaning the rescue response would have been weakened if an explosion had occurred.

SPEAK OUT, WORKERS TOLD

Two men intimately involved in last year's Pike River disaster have a simple message for Huntly miners with safety fears – speak up.

Bernie Monk, whose son Michael died in last year's explosion, had heard worrying stories about safety at the Huntly East Coal Mine.

A good friend told him everything looked shipshape, but underneath "it's as bad as Pike".

An incident at Huntly reportedly occurred during the week of the first Pike River anniversary where 29 people perished near Greymouth.

"At least someone has spoken out, whereas with the Pike situation I don't think enough people spoke out about the seriousness," Mr Monk said.

Worried workers should contact their union or speak with management, and if nothing was done they should walk out, he said.

Grey District mayor Tony Kokshoorn said dangerous levels of methane in the Huntly mine were unacceptable.

"It's crucial that miners feel safe in the mines." The buck stopped with management.

"The miners must voice their opinion. It's up to management to put them in safe working conditions. It's absolutely crucial that we all pull together on this. We don't want another Pike – too painful," he said.

Mr Monk said New Zealand was now down to one mine inspector.

"You look at your Strongman and your Brunner, and now Pike, they were all methane problems and it takes a major disaster every 30, 40 or 50 years for someone to stand up and do something about it – we can't afford that any more.

"It's a major earner for New Zealand – for crying out loud, let's stand up and do something about it."

USA: Federal UBB Report to be Released Next Week

Extract from West Virginia MetroNews

Officials with the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration will, next week, release the results of their investigation into the Upper Big

Branch Mine Disaster that killed 29 miners in Raleigh County in 2010.

MSHA will make its report public Dec. 6 in Beckley. Officials will hold a press conference at 3 p.m. in the auditorium of the National Mine Health and Safety Academy. The report will simultaneously be made available online.

The MSHA investigation is one of several probes into the explosion that rocked a Massey Energy Mine on April 5, 2010.

An independent investigation put together by then-Gov. Joe Manchin and a report from the United Mine Workers of America concluded Massey officials repeatedly violated safety standards. The UMWA report, titled "Industrial Homicide," called for criminal charges against Massey officials.

Both reports said a massive build up of coal dust, caused by improper and inadequate rock dusting, led to the explosion.

UMWA officials said the catastrophe could have been avoided had company leaders met basic safety standards. The union also criticized MSHA inspectors for not enforcing regulations.

However, Massey's own report claimed an inundation of naturally occurring ethane caused the blast.

In June, MSHA officials released preliminary results from the investigation. MSHA placed blame on Massey and said the company hid critical information from safety inspectors.

Thursday 1 December 2011

NZ: Peter Whittall's last day as Pike River boss

Extract from tvnz.co.nz

Peter Whittall, who became the public face of the Pike River mine disaster, will stand down as Pike River Coal chief executive today.

Whittall became a familiar face after 29 miners lost their lives following explosions in the Greymouth mine in November last year.



Pike River Coal (in receivership) chief executive Peter Whittall - Source: ONE News

Whittall, who has worked in the mining industry for almost 30 years, faced the media on a daily basis in the days following the initial blast to give updates on the recovery operation.

Earlier this month Whittall was one of three parties charged by the Department of Labour over the explosions.

He said he would vigorously defend the charge of failing to take all practicable steps to ensure the safety of workers.

Whittall became chief executive of Pike River just a few weeks before the explosions and was kept on after the company went into receivership.

Whittall, an Australian, will stay in New Zealand for the inquiry, his lawyers said.

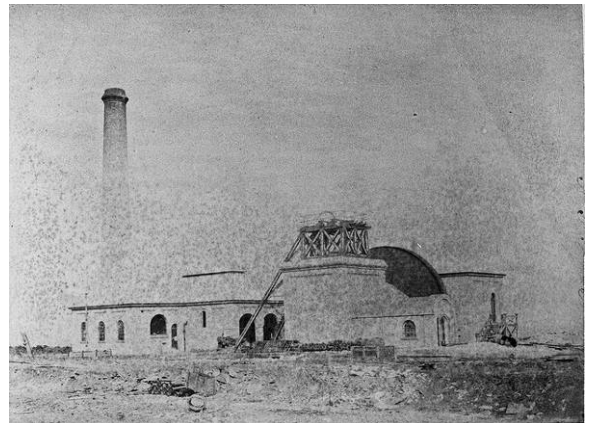
Mining history photos



Stockrington Number 2 Colliery, No.3 Tunnel, Stockrington, NSW, [n.d.]



Jurymen for Dudley mine disaster, NSW, 29 March 1898



Lambton B Colliery, Redhead, NSW, 2 July 1894

Mining dictionary

A guide to coal mining terminology

B

BARRICADING

Enclosing part of a mine to prevent inflow of noxious gasses from a mine fire or an explosion.



Polyurethane foam being sprayed to seal edges of brattice cloth barricade.

-Ed