



Mining Accident News No.1203

1 to 10 February 2012

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Wednesday 1 February 2012

Canada: Friends recall fallen miner as 'tough, but soft'

Extract from CBC news, Ca

Steve Perry hailed from Corner Brook, N.L., and worker for Vale in Sudbury for 16 years

As the Sudbury mining community grieves in the aftermath of a fatal mining accident Sunday, friends are speaking out about the man they knew.

Vale employees Richard Bangs and Marcel Poirier worked alongside Steven Perry for almost a decade.



Brittany Boyd-Perry stands with her father Stephen Perry. The pair lived in Chelmsford. Steve was killed in a mining accident Sunday.

"It's not a pleasant feeling at all ... [I'm] heartbroken," said Marcel Poirier, who worked on the same crew as Steve Perry for eight years. "It's the loss of a friend."

Poirier said Perry was the same with everyone.

'He had lots of love for his daughter'—Richard Bangs, on his fallen mining co-worker Steve Perry

"You know, he wouldn't hop on any different foot, whether you were the Queen of England or you were just an average Joe," he said.

Perry had a tough exterior, softened by a father's heart, said Richard Bangs.

"He had lots of love for his daughter," Bangs said. "He had a certain way when he talked about her ... there was a certain way that he came across that [she] was the most important thing in his life."

A life that was cut short last Sunday after fallen rock overtook him at Vale's Coleman Mine in Levack.

A memorial service is planned for the 47-year-old miner. It will be held on Friday at Christ the King Church in Sudbury and starts at 10 a.m.

Perry was from Corner Brook, N.L. and started with Vale, in Sudbury, 16 years ago.

Operations at all five Vale mines in the area have been suspended as the company takes a

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Issue 3 of 2012

“safety pause.” An investigation by the company, United Steelworkers Union, Greater Sudbury Police Service and the Ministry of Labour is underway.

While the company said it's using this time to step back and refocus on safety, so are its employees.

"I'm just gonna do the best I can, try and work safe for myself and my family and my co-workers," said Bangs, who is close to retirement.

USA: MSHA says accidents in Southern W.Va., agency's biggest coal mining district, are declining

Extract from The Republic, Columbus, Indiana, USA

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — A federal regulator says the number of accidents and injuries in the nation's largest coal mining district is falling fast.

The Mine Safety and Health Administration's District 4 in southern West Virginia has 66 surface mines and 89 underground mines.

Manager Charlie Carpenter says when he started last May, the district's accident was unacceptable — 249 in a single quarter. All but 62 involved injuries.

Manager Charlie Carpenter says when he started last May, the district's accident was unacceptable — 249 in a single quarter.

That fell to 179 accidents, including 33 without injuries, the next quarter.

In January, only 14 accidents were reported, and half had no injuries. Carpenter says that could signal a dramatic improvement for the first quarter.

The number of citations issued is also down.

Carpenter says that tells him that people are taking care of business and ensuring their mines are compliant.

Thursday 2 February 2012

Canada: Ministry investigators want more info from Vale

Extract from CBC News, Canada

The Ministry of Labour is asking for information from Vale as it continues its investigation at Coleman mine in Sudbury.

Ministry officials are investigating the death of miner Stephen Perry, who died in an accident at the Levack mine on Sunday.

The ministry wants reports on previous accidents involving a piece of equipment that Perry was using.

Officials have also asked for information about the recent mining history of the area in which Perry was working, which includes records related to any recent blasting, rock bursts and seismic data.

The Ministry of Labour is just one of the agencies investigating. Vale said it will conduct a joint investigation with the United Steelworkers union.

Production at all five Vale mines in Sudbury was suspended following Perry's death.

The company has still not said when it plans to restart the mines again.

A memorial service is planned for the 47-year-old miner. It will be held on Friday at Christ the King Church in Sudbury and starts at 10 a.m.

USA: House GOP delays mine-safety hearing to wait for internal review

Extract from The Hill, USA

House Republicans have delayed a mine-safety hearing until the Labor Department issues findings on the government's role in a deadly explosion at a West Virginia coal mine almost two years ago.

In December, Rep. John Kline (R-Minn.), the chairman of the House Education and Workforce

Committee, tentatively planned a Feb. 7 hearing on 2010's Upper Big Branch (UBB) disaster — a response to the Mine Safety and Health Administration's (MSHA) damning report that the mine owner, Massey Energy, systematically violated federal safety standards that might have prevented the blast.

But that date has been pushed, Kline's office said this week, to ensure that Labor's probe of the government's role in the tragedy can be included in Congress's examination.

"We believe the internal review of MSHA's actions regarding the Upper Big Branch explosion is an important piece of the puzzle and should be considered by the committee," Kline spokesman Brian Newell said in an email. "We hope to receive the internal review as soon as possible so the committee can schedule the hearing and move forward in a [responsible] way."

The internal review could surface any day. A Labor Department spokesperson said Thursday that the report is expected "within two to three months after release of accident investigation report," which was released Dec. 6.

Still, news of the delay wasn't welcomed by some Democrats, who have pushed hard for tougher mine-safety laws since the UBB blast killed 29 miners in April 2010.

Told of the delay, Rep. Nick Rahall (D), who represents the West Virginia district that's home to the UBB mine, rolled his eyes.

"Absurd, absurd and absurd," Rahall charged. "We should be beyond that."

Rahall said the Republican strategy is simply "to delay, delay, delay" in hopes the public forgets about the disaster — and the pressure wanes on Congress to enact reform.

"We have the results of investigations now in hand," he said.

In their December report, MSHA investigators found that Massey, in the lead-up to the UBB explosion, "promoted and enforced a workplace

culture that valued production over safety, including practices calculated to allow it to conduct mining operations in violation of the law."

In response, Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), ranking member the Workforce Committee, introduced legislation to hike penalties for safety violations, expand whistleblower protections for miners who report hazards and grant subpoena power to federal inspectors investigating accidents. The bill passed out of the committee in 2010, when the Democrats controlled the House, but failed to win the two-thirds support to pass on the floor later in the year.

Republicans have resisted new mine-safety legislation, arguing that Congress shouldn't intervene before the cause of the blast is known. GOP leaders have warned that tougher rules governing mines could kill jobs amid an unemployment crisis.

Rahall refuted the idea that the Democrats' bill is overly burdensome on the industry.

"It's not our desire to punish those who are doing good, who are doing right by safety," Rahall said. "But it's our desire to ensure that what happened at the Upper Big Branch in my district does not happen again.

"The best that we could do is to ensure that they did not die in vain."

Friday 3 February 2012

4 Donetsk coal miners rescued after Horlivka gallery collapse

Extract from SteelGuru

Four Ukrainian coal miners were rescued and successfully lifted to the surface late Tuesday following a gallery collapse that had trapped them deep underground.

After the accident, which occurred at the Rumyantseva coal mine in Horlivka, the Donetsk region, four coal miners had been trapped since Tuesday morning at the depth of 1,090 meters below the surface.

The Trade Union of Coal Industry Workers of Ukraine reported that as a result of a rock fall at a depth of 970-1,090 meters at 09.30 on January 31st 2012, four miners were trapped.

At the time of the collapse, eleven miners were in the affected area, seven miners were brought to the surface safe.

The operation of the mine has been suspended.

This week in mining accident history

3 February 1942
Chosei Mine
Nishikiwa, Japan
Undersea coal mine
183 drowned by tunnel collapse

Ceremony remembers Koreans killed in Japan mining accident

“How scared and lonely you are in such freezing water.”



Four ethnic Koreans were near the shore of Nishikiwa, Japan, Sunday. A gray-haired man silently shed tears looking at the quiet winter sea.

They were among the relatives of the estimated 183 Koreans killed by the collapse after being suddenly infiltrated by sea water of the Chosei mine on Feb. 3, 1942. Despite several warnings over the danger, the Japanese government pushed for the development of the risky area banned by law because it urgently needed energy due to the outbreak of World War II in the Pacific.

Among the victims, 136 were Korean labourers taken by force to Japan and 49 other nationals.

They were detained in a place surrounded by high fences and worked day and night at the mine. They were buried at sea instead of being returning home. After the accident, the mine handed over ancestral tablets and compensation. Since then, the Korean victims have been forgotten.

The accident has been neglected at an official level, and the Japanese government has banned the excavation of the remains of the victims.

The nightmare at the mine was highlighted again after a committee for the study of forced labour exploitation and victims under Japanese colonial rule of the Korean Peninsula and The Dong-A Ilbo began to document survivors' testimony. Certain conscientious Japanese nationals also helped the initiative.

Members of a Japanese group purchased a lot near the sea three years ago to help the bereaved families to commemorate their deceased relatives. “We wanted a memorial service at a place where we could see the ventilated opening of the seabed mine best. But we couldn't do it because the place belonged to a descendant of the mine owner,” said Kim Hyeong-soo, a representative of Korean bereaved families. “Now, we can have a memorial service thanks to Japanese.”

The bereaved families got emotional at the joint memorial service for the 70th anniversary of the accident on the site offered by Japanese. One member said, “If it's this cold here on land, how cold would it be deep down in the water? The bodies might not have rotted away yet because it's too cold there.” After the service, they went to the chimney in a ship and laid flowers.

The committee said, “We will do our best to find the victims' bodies and bring them home.”

Saturday 4 February 2012

Two dead, six injured in explosion at coal mine

Extract from Yonhap News

TAEBAEK, South Korea, Feb. 4 (Yonhap) -- A gas explosion at a coal mine has killed two people and injured six others, police said Saturday.

The blast occurred at around 8 p.m. on Friday when nine miners were working at a site about 970 meters deep or 3,400 meters from the entrance, police officer Chang Jae-koo said.

He said the wounded are being treated for carbon monoxide poisoning at nearby hospitals in Taebaek, some 250 kilometers southeast of Seoul. Two of them were transferred to a special hospital in Seoul for treatment of burns, according to hospital officials.

Chang said police investigators questioned the ninth miner who was not injured and walked out of the mine by himself.

An investigation is under way to determine the exact cause of the accident, Chang added, but they could not access to the site as toxic gas still remains inside the pit.

Taebaek was once the largest mining city in South Korea with 44 mines, though the number has now dwindled to just two, as the country has shifted toward imported oil as an energy source, according to Kim Dae-jin, an official of Taebaek Coal Museum.

Sunday 5 February 2012

China coal mine explosion kills 13

Extract from www.hispantv.com

A methane gas explosion at a coal mine has claimed the lives of 13 workers and injured eight others in China's southwestern province of Sichuan.



Chinese coal miners (file photo)

The explosion ripped through the Diaoyutai mine outside Yibin city, situated 1,020 miles (1,641 kilometres) southwest of the Chinese capital Beijing, on Friday afternoon. Thirteen miners were killed and eight others injured as a result of the blast.

The provincial work safety administration said the injured workers are being treated at a local hospital, where four are in a critical condition. The fate of one missing miner remains unknown.

A thorough investigation into the cause of the accident is underway.

China's mining industry is the most dangerous in the world. According to official figures, 2,433 people died in coal mine accidents in China in 2010.

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

The Chinese government has shut down hundreds of mines over the past year as part of its efforts to improve safety standards.

However, mining safety rules are often ignored in favour of profit as the economy has boomed.

Lives of miners at risk as government turns a blind eye to safety violations

Extract from the Express Tribune, India

ABBOTABAD: Lives of hundreds of mine workers is at risk as the mineral department and contractors have failed to ensure mandatory occupational safety in mines in

Abbottabad district, *The Express Tribune* observed on Sunday.



A view of the mine in which 11 people died when they were trapped underneath a heavy mass of rock last Thursday.
PHOTO: FILE

According to an estimate, over 5000 workers are engaged in extracting minerals like gypsum, talc, chromite, coal and phosphate from mines in Hazara division. But almost all the mines lack safety measures which are mandated by labour laws.

Mine owners are supposed to provide safety equipment like gloves, hats, goggles and uniform to every miner before they enter a mine, said Zahoorul Haq, a labour leader. Miners are required to enter coalmines with oxygen masks. "Labour laws do not permit owners to engage workers without ensuring occupational safety.

However, owing to lack of proper safety measures mine-related accidents are common in phosphate mines. Last year, six casualties were reported in the district. The death of 11 miners in Batkinala Tarnawai village last week was proof of violation of law by officials and lease owners.

Nine workers and two contractors were having lunch on the mouth of an illegally developed phosphate mine, when a heavy mass of rock collapsed on them. Their bodies, recovered after an effort of 50 hours, were beyond recognition.

Villagers and police said the mine was developed unscientifically which caused the accident. There are only 10 to 15 legally developed phosphate mines in the Tarnawai range while over 50 were made illegally in

connivance with mineral department officials who demand Rs500 per ton.

Contractors pay Rs3000 to the police for each truckload at check posts for allowing us to take minerals to our warehouses for transportation to Haripur, said a miner.

For legalising illegally excavated rock phosphate, private lease owners of other mines issue a receipt of royalty for Rs300 and then the rock is taken to Haripur, where fertilizer factories purchase raw material for Rs2500 to Rs3500 per ton.

Sources said 1235 acres given on lease by the mineral department and 80% contractors are involved in illegal excavation. Illegal mines are not inspected by officials. 50 truckloads of rock phosphate is transported from the mines every day and each truck carries 20 tons, out of which 70% of the consignment is illegal, said Sher Bandi Khan, president Mine Workers' Association.

The mineral department routinely trains mine workers but safety measures are rarely applied. Under the law, a mines inspector is supposed to visit mines every month to check whether safety rules are being applied and if mines were developed in the prescribed way, said an informed source requesting anonymity.

The mines were discovered by a British company in 1974 and were under the control of Sarhad Development Authority till 2002. The mineral department auctions the leases annually. A 3600% increase in lease charges by the government has encouraged illegal excavation, said Khan. Illegal excavation is causing a loss of millions to the national exchequer and exposing hundreds of mine workers to danger. He said that the minister was awarding contracts to favourites while applications of dozens of contractors were pending since 2007.

When approached for comments, Inspector Mines Irfanullah rejected the allegation that officials of his department were involved in

supporting illegal extraction. He accused the police of non-cooperation and said over 10 criminal cases of assault on his staff by illegal excavators were pending with the police. "Whenever they tried to stop illegally mining phosphate, they were attacked.

After District Coordination Officer Abbottabad banned illegal mining in the limits of Abbottabad district last Sunday, several vehicles carrying phosphate and gypsum were impounded by the police.

Monday 6 February 2012

NZ: Pike River families design 'aggressive' plans to speed up process

Extract from nzherald.co.nz

Families of Pike River victims frustrated at the lack of progress in returning the fallen miners' bodies are designing "aggressive" action plans to speed up the recovery process.

The families have been forced to dig into their own pockets to commission independent engineers and experts to find alternate methods of recovering the remains of the 29 miners who died in explosions 15 months ago.

A review, commissioned by the grieving families, has given an agonising three-year time-frame for reaching the dead men.

But the engineers who came up with the review have been told to go away and come back with three alternative options for recovery, which will be presented to "certain interested parties" later this week.

Bernie Monk, a spokesman for the Pike River victims' families, says they feel "let down" by the inactivity which he says "all comes down to money". The Paroa Hotel publican said: "We're still stuck where we were 15 months ago. We should've been down [the mine] six months ago.

"We're not putting up with it anymore and so we're going to be very aggressive towards recovery."

Last week, the families met with engineer Bruce McLean who they have employed, along with their lawyer Nicholas Davison QC.

They were given "three different options" of the best ways to recover the fallen men.

Mr Monk, father of 23-year-old victim Michael Monk, explained: "I can't say what those options are yet. We've sent the engineer away to update his propositions, and later this week we will be in a position to reveal the options to certain interested parties and put the cards on the table.

"We've had enough. We're sick of having to wait for the receivers and for Pike River because they've got nowhere."

Receivers PricewaterhouseCoopers has been brought in to oversee the sale of the troubled mine, which they now say is imminent.

But as the sale drags on, uncertainty remains over who will pay for the recovery deep underground.

Grey Mayor Tony Kokshoorn has been pushing the government to help launch, and invest in to, a trust fund to pay for the recovery.

However, the Pike River families feel uncomfortable about asking for money and are seeking their own way forward.

Mr Monk said: "I really feel gutted that it's been left to us. It shouldn't be up to us to shell money out to get this done but it obviously won't happen unless we do it ourselves.

"We feel embarrassed talking about money because it's not what we're all about - we're all about recovery.

"The whole situation of recovery of our guys is down to money, and Pike River and the receivers haven't got it. They've been relying on the sale of the mine, but we're not happy with that.

"Now that the sale is basically at a standstill, we don't want to hear in a year's time that is still the case."

The Pike River families will next meet on Wednesday where they will discuss their updated options and decide on when to reveal them, Mr Monk says.

Tuesday 7 February 2012

S.Africa mines minister targets CEOs on fatalities

Extract from Reuters

South Africa's mines minister said on Tuesday that industry chief executives should be held liable for avoidable fatalities, also raising the possibility of court action.

Targeting chief executives would take her safety drive to new levels as the government tries to stem the death toll in the country's mines, the world's deepest and among the most dangerous.

"Fatalities which could have been avoided, we feel that CEOs must be held liable for those accidents, because they are responsible for the operations. As they show interest in how they grow the profits they must also show interest in safety," Susan Shabangu told Reuters in an interview.

Asked if this meant possible court action, she said: "These are some of the issues that we must look at. For me the courts are the last option. But legislation provides for us to go to courts."

Earlier she told the annual African mining conference in Cape Town that the platinum industry's contribution to fatalities in the mining sector remained a "serious concern" and defended safety stoppages which she said had contributed to a drop in accident rates.

South Africa's platinum sector has been battered by oversupply, squeezed margins and an uncertain economic outlook, making producers increasingly vocal about regulatory pressures, particularly the impact of inspections and

stoppages as part of the government's zero-harm target.

"The department has been greatly concerned about lack of improvement in compliance and fatalities in the major platinum mines," Shabangu said.

"The platinum sector alone contributes about 30 percent of all fatalities which remains a serious concern."

The gold sector has also been subject to increased scrutiny and Graham Briggs, chief executive of Harmony Gold, South Africa's third largest gold producer, described the government's campaign on Monday as punitive.

Harmony cut its full-year output target by 13 percent because of the stoppages.

Shabangu said that there was a slight drop in mining fatalities to 123 in 2011 from 127 in 2010 and that 13 miners have been killed so far this year in South Africa.

She also said in her speech that the governing African National Congress (ANC) had reinforced in a key policy document that nationalisation, long feared by the country's mining industry, was not a viable option.

"I must indicate that we welcome the fact that the report of the ANC task team on nationalisation has reinforced the ANC's earlier decision that nationalisation is not a viable policy for South Africa," she said.

USA: Industry leaders want drug tests at all mines

Extract The Register-Herald.com

CHARLESTON — An industry leader gave lawmakers stark examples Monday of mining casualties caused by impaired workers and called for mandatory drug testing.

In one fatality, Chris Hamilton told a meeting of House and Senate judiciary members, a miner high on prescription drugs smashed a locomotive into a mine car, killing a co-worker.

Just south of Charleston, he continued, a man operating a 50-ton surface truck, abusing cocaine, ripped up a vehicle with two engineers inside.

"We have our share of drug use in coal and we ask your support to help us as we move toward a drug-free work place," the senior vice president of the West Virginia Coal Association said.

Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin, in a massive mine safety package, has included drug screens for prospective miners.

"We support mandatory drug testing," Hamilton said.

But this doesn't mean the industry wants to impose the burden of drug screens on the state, he said.

Hamilton said operators are victimized as well after investing years and thousands of dollars in an employee, only to lose the worker to drug or alcohol abuse.

"It's not just the druggies that fall victims to the drug problem," he said.

"It's rampant through society. It's in our schools. It's in our industrialized world. It's no more, no less, prominent in coal mining than anywhere else."

Hamilton said both Kentucky and Virginia in recent years implemented drug testing in their mines.

As a result, more than 1,400 miner certificates were suspended in Kentucky, while some 500 were yanked in Virginia, he said.

"We fear that a number — I can't tell you if it's 5 percent, 20 percent or 50 percent — of those individuals are working here in the state of West Virginia," he said.

Hamilton's appearance followed one by Eugene White, deputy director of the state Office of Miners' Health Safety and Training.

White said his agency looks into complaints of drug misuse, most of them called in by wives or disgruntled co-workers of miners.

Law forbids them from touching miners or examining their attire, including hard hats, without permission.

When asked if drugs or alcohol figured into any of the reports on the Upper Big Branch disaster in Raleigh County, he said, "Not that I'm aware of."

White said he expects the state's official findings of the April 5, 2010, explosion that killed 29 workers at the Upper Big Branch mine to be revealed by the end of the month.

So far, separate investigations by the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration, the special one ordered by former Gov. Joe Manchin, and one by the mine's onetime owner, Massey Energy, have been disclosed.

Last year, White said, his agency filed 18,708 violations at mines across the state, while conducting 5,413 inspections.

In its work, he said, inspectors looked into rock dust samples at 879 mines, and 98 of them failed to pass muster.

White said 16 of his inspectors were assigned to examine the Upper Big Branch disaster — the worst U.S. mining accident in four decades.

"They want to try to give you the most factual report," he said.

White told Sen. Richard Browning, D-Wyoming, the state would need to pay inspectors between \$60,000 and \$70,000 annually to be able to attract and retain them so that salaries compare favorably with mining positions.

Existing state law requires inspectors in West Virginia to have mining experience, but MSHA imposes no such stipulation, he said.

"I would not have a problem with that, sir," White said, when Delegate Tim Manchin, D-Harrison, wondered if he would be willing to relax the mining experience rule.

Hamilton told lawmakers they need to understand the quarterly inspections at mines isn't a simple, cursory look-see.

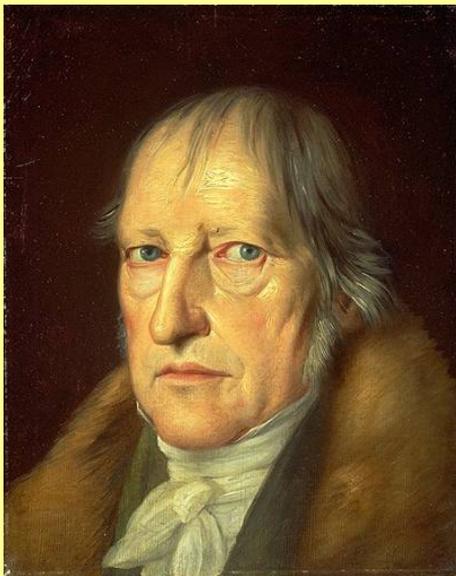
"Most inspections last upwards of weeks," he said.

"Some last continuously, day in, day out, for 365 days and beyond. Many of our mines average one or more mine inspections per day on an annual basis. No mine inspection lasts hours."

In fact, he said, many installations are examined every single day.

"No other industry, no other business, has that kind of government attention that we're aware of," he added.

Quote of the week



"Whatever is reasonable is true, and whatever is true is reasonable."

Georg W. Hegel
German philosopher, 1770-1831.

India: Five women killed in mine cave-in

Extract from The Times of India

BOKARO: Five women were killed after the surface of an illegal coal mine caved in while they were digging out coal at Prem Pahari in Chandrapura here on Tuesday.

The deceased have been identified as Sanju Devi (30), Geeta Devi (32), Baleshwari (30), Kunti Devi (31) and Nirmala Devi (32). Police had initially recovered three bodies but later found two more bodies that the villagers hid before police reached there.

Thursday 9 February 2012

USA: Drug testing bill 'a distraction,' McAteer says

Extract from the Charleston Gazette, USA

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin's proposal to require drug testing for West Virginia's coal miners is "a distraction" from efforts to improve mine safety following the Upper Big Branch Mine Disaster, a leading safety advocate and the United Mine Workers agreed Tuesday.

Independent investigator Davitt McAteer urged lawmakers to separate the drug-testing proposal from the safety bill and focus instead on requiring better mine ventilation monitors and toughening the state's limits on coal dust in underground operations.

Dennis O'Dell, safety director for the UMW, questions whether the drug-testing legislation was necessary, given that most of the state's major coal producers already have such programs for their workers.



Independent investigator Davitt McAteer, right, talks with United Mine Workers safety director Dennis O'Dell prior to Tuesday's legislative hearing on the Upper Big Branch Mine Disaster. Photo Lawrence Pierce

"We're not druggies and we're not alcoholics," O'Dell told lawmakers during a statehouse hearing. "I don't think mine inspectors need to be drug and alcohol police to take them away from what their duties really are.

"It's only those operations that are not reputable that have no alcohol or drug policies in place, because they don't care. All they care about is production," O'Dell said. "Punish them. Don't punish the rest of us."

McAteer and O'Dell testified Tuesday, during the second of a two-day legislative informational session focused on competing mine safety bills proposed by Tomblin and House Speaker Rick Thompson.

The bill contains similar provisions regarding criminal penalties for advance notice of government mine inspections and automatic shutdown of mining equipment if explosive methane is present.

But the centerpiece of the governor's bill is its industry-backed drug-testing requirement, while the proposal from Thompson -- whose father died in a mining accident -- includes new protections for mine safety whistleblowers and gives the families of mine accident victims the right to participate in government investigations.

During Tuesday's hearing, O'Dell showed lawmakers a federal Mine Safety and Health Administration video animation that depicts what MSHA investigators believe led to the April 5, 2010, disaster that killed 29 miners at Upper Big Branch.

In separate reports, MSHA, the UMW and McAteer all generally agreed that the Upper Big Branch disaster was caused by Massey Energy's systematic failure to follow safety rules governing mine ventilation and the cleanup of highly explosive coal dust.

"This catastrophe could have been prevented," O'Dell said.

McAteer noted that, in 2006, lawmakers passed landmark mine rescue legislation before the end

of January, the month when 14 miners died in separate accidents at the Sago Mine in Upshur County and the Aracoma Mine in Logan County.

It's been nearly two years since Upper Big Branch, McAteer said. The state Office of Miners Health, Safety and Training has still not issued its report on Upper Big Branch, and lawmakers have not moved to pass any mine safety reforms.

McAteer recommended that lawmakers pass legislation to require mine operators to use state-of-the-art coal-dust "explosibility" meters and force companies to install real-time ventilation monitors to keep track of fresh-air flow underground.

Such equipment is commercially available, McAteer said, but is not widely used by the industry.

Alpha Natural Resources, which bought Massey in June 2011, is adopting such technology as part of a deal with U.S. Attorney Booth Goodwin to avoid any corporate criminal charges related to the disaster. Other companies have not stepped forward to match Alpha's actions.

"Some of our friends in the industry are not keen on having that kind of data available following an accident," McAteer told lawmakers. "You should be as a Legislature. You should be keen on having that knowledge so we can convert it into prevention."

McAteer also called on lawmakers to get out ahead of the federal government and implement a tight limit on the legal level of coal dust in underground mines, a measure he said would help prevent black lung disease. He noted that his investigation found nearly three-quarters of the Upper Big Branch miners had black lung disease, while the only sign of drug use by the miners was one autopsy that found cough medicine.

"[The drug testing proposal] is a distraction," McAteer said. "It is not involved in the Upper Big Branch Mine Disaster. That's our finding. No one has disputed it."

McAteer lamented that the findings at Upper Big Branch were so similar to the causes of the Monongah Mine Disaster in 1907, which killed several hundred workers, and that West Virginia continues to rank among the worst states in most mine safety statistics.

"We in this state continue to lead this nation or nearly lead this nation in the number of mining fatalities," McAteer said. "We can fix that, and we need to fix that."

NZ: Pike River inquiry delivers answers

Extract from nzherald.co.nz

The white flash reported by Pike River Mine survivor Daniel Rockhouse as he staggered from the tunnel just after it exploded, helped convince experts the disaster may have been caused when gases unleashed by a roof fall met sparking electrical equipment.

The Royal Commission of Inquiry resumed in Greymouth today, and finally delivered some answers about the deadly November 2010 explosion that killed 29 men underground.

The commission is leaning heavily on the Department of Labour's own investigation report, with a panel of five experts, to explain what happened on the afternoon of November 19, 2010.

Australian expert David Reece went through many different scenarios - an auxiliary fan was one possible ignition source, and something could have hit a pipeline.

But Mr Rockhouse, the survivor closest to the seat of the blast, saw a white flash, that indicated an electrical problem. It probably originated in a part of the known as Spaghetti Junction.

Chemical analysis and the size of the blast pointed to a gas - not a coaldust - explosion.

Commission chairman Justice Graham Panckhurst said the preferred expert theory was

that a large collapse in the 'goaf', the void left behind by mining, had occurred.

This sent methane rushing through the mine, diluting as it went, until it reached the explosive range.

About the same time, the surface control room operator Daniel Duggan had turned on the water pumps into the mine, although not to the hydro monitor coal-cutting machine at the coalface.

This in turn re-powered the electrical system. The Department of Labour's experts believe this caused the variable speed drive - which had components throughout the mine and moderated the supply of current - to spark. Problems with variable speed drives have been reported in Australia.

There was also possible arcing.

"Nothing Daniel did was wrong," said Commissioner David Henry.

Mr Duggan's brother Chris, also a coal miner, died in the blast.

The department has written to mining companies and Australian regulators expressing concerns about variable speed drives.

Under cross-examination, the department's lead investigator Brett Murray said they had relied heavily on circumstantial evidence and there were still a number of unknowns because no one had made it back underground to conduct a scene examination.

He told former Pike River Coal chief executive Peter Whittall's lawyer Stacey Shortall that former mine managers Mick Lerch and Kobus Louw had not been interviewed for the report.

The department had been unable to rule out that someone carrying contraband underground had caused the explosion.

Ms Shortall said "one piece of the puzzle" was missing from the report, because the department had not looked at whether its own inspectors made mistakes.

Those inspectors came under fire at the commission last year for failing to spot ongoing safety issues at the mine.

Ms Shortall also said that after the disaster one inspector sat in on up to 18 official interviews with other mine employees.

Some equipment was not inspected until many months after the blast.

Mr Whittall, Valley Longwall Drilling and Pike River Coal Ltd (in receivership) have all been charged by the department in connection with the deaths.

This third phase of the inquiry is scheduled to continue until Friday next week.

Meanwhile, the Royal Commission's request for a six-month extension has been granted.

Its final report will now be made to the Government at the end of September.

The report was due back by the end of this month.

But the commissioners said their timelines and management of evidence and hearings were being complicated by the parallel inquiries being conducted by the police and the Department of Labour.

Friday 10 February 2012

Pike River body showed no sign of explosive force

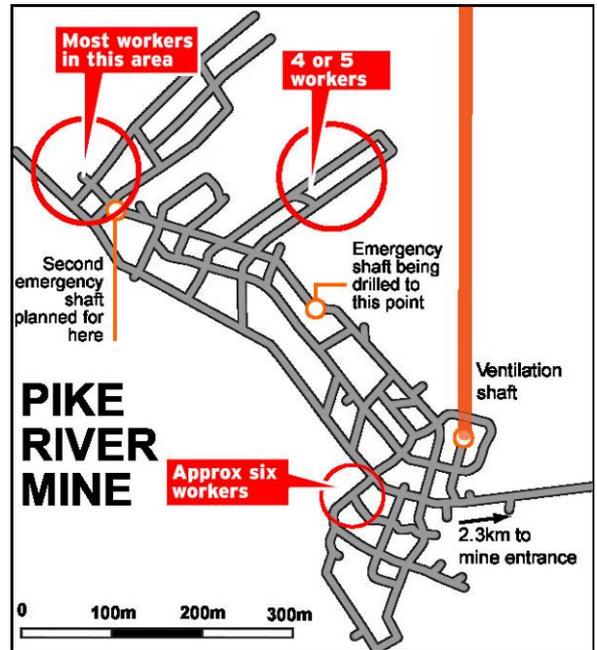
Extract from stuff.co.nz

Images of a body inside Pike River coalmine after November 2010's fatal blast have been closely analysed by experts for clues on what happened.

Australian mine safety consultant David Reece has begun his third day today giving evidence at the royal commission into the deaths of 29 men at the underground West Coast mine.

Reece, one of a panel of five experts employed by the Labour Department to investigate what caused the explosion, said the panel closely

examined the body's position in scans taken down borehole 47, which was near the hydro-mining area.



It appeared to have collapsed or "relaxed" and showed no sign of a violent force from an explosion, he said.



On Wednesday, he told the inquiry at Greymouth District Court the blast's most likely cause was a roof collapse in the hydro-mining goaf, a void left after coal was extracted, which pushed out a large volume of highly concentrated methane accumulated there.

The gas would then become diluted by air to within the explosive range before being ignited by an electric spark elsewhere in the mine.

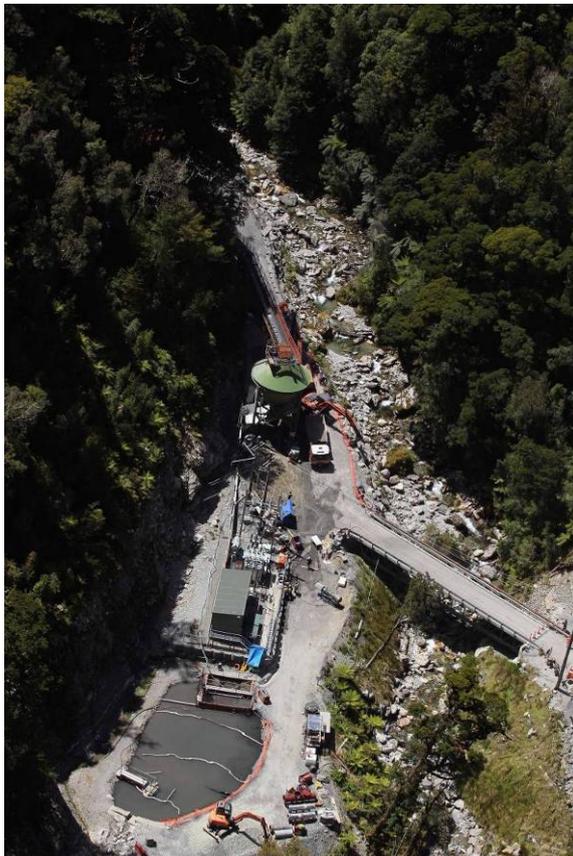
He said the ignition was most likely a result of the electric supply being switched on to the mine's underground water pumps, which happened shortly before the explosion.

Pike families lawyer Richard Raymond told the inquiry the department this week had raised its desire to explore "pit bottom and stone" in the mine's tunnel to assess electrical equipment that might have caused the explosion.

That area was about 1900m along the 2.4km tunnel, where blast survivor Daniel Rockhouse was when the mine exploded on November 19, 2010.

Reece agreed it would be beneficial for the department's ongoing investigation to inspect the pit bottom area to check variable speed drives, which powered the mine.

"That is potentially a key point as far as ignition goes."



Pike River Coal Mine

Work was underway to create a remote seal about 2.1km down the tunnel, in front of a rockfall blocking access to the main working part of the mine, which would allow the tunnel to be re-ventilation with air.

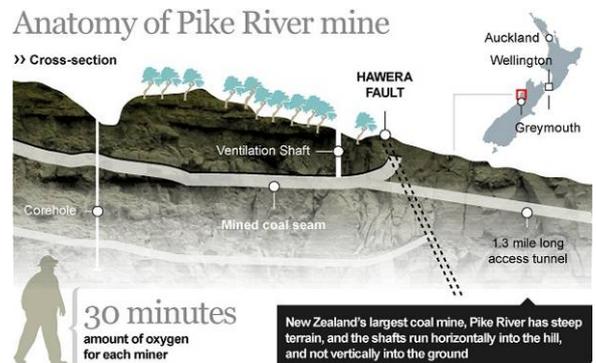
It was currently full of methane.

Raymond said the tunnel would be re-ventilated hopefully next month, which would allow department staff to enter.

He questioned whether the department was working on its plan to re-enter the mine to check out electrical equipment.

While Reece was unaware of its planning, he agreed early planning would allow a prompt reconnaissance and avoid further delays.

He also agreed to recommend to the department that drilling a borehole at the front of the hydro-mining goaf would be useful to see if the roof had collapsed there, which might confirm the panel's most likely scenario for the explosion.



Mining dictionary

A guide to coal mining terminology

B

BEARING PLATE A plate used to distribute a given load. In roof bolting, the plate used between the bolt head and the roof.



-Ed