

October 30 – Mine Rescue Day

Since mining began in our nation, many in the mining community have been called upon to rescue miners trapped by mine fires, explosions, roof falls, inundations of water or harmful gases and other emergency conditions in coal and metal and nonmetal mines.

Those rescuers are miners, mine supervisors, trainers and safety specialists, state and federal mine safety personnel and others who heed the call for help. Many are dedicated volunteers; all are a special breed. The number of times that mine rescuers have placed their own safety and lives at risk to save others during our mining history is staggering. These brave souls undertake some of the most difficult and risky emergency response work, under some of the most arduous and treacherous conditions. Having worked with this special breed during many mine emergencies, I know that first hand.

Many times, these rescuers travel miles in the dark underground mine workings filled with debris and poisonous and explosive gases after devastating mine fires or explosions trying to find missing miners or recovering those who did not survive.

The most notable and tragic disaster in U.S. mining history was at West Virginia's Monongah mine in 1907, resulting in the deaths of 362 miners. Mine disasters in the early years of the 20th century led to the creation of the U.S. Bureau of Mines in 1910 and the development of more formal mine rescue preparations and mine rescue teams. We still use the innovations created over a hundred years ago today.

Throughout the 20th century and into modern times, mine rescuers have donned life sustaining breathing apparatuses and necessary gear to respond to one mine emergency after another. The major mine fires and explosions that have required the services of mine rescuers are

well known: the Farmington coal mine disaster in West Virginia in 1968 that claimed 78 miners' lives, the Sunshine silver mine disaster in Idaho in 1972 that claimed 91 lives, the Scotia coal mine disaster in Kentucky in 1976 where 26 died, the Wilberg mine disaster in Utah in 1984 that claimed 27 lives, the Jim Walter Resources accident in Alabama in 2001 that claimed 13 lives, the 2006 West Virginia Sago Mine disaster that claimed 12 lives and the recent West Virginia Upper Big Branch mine disaster that claimed 29 lives.

These are just a few of the tragic events where mine rescuers have been called upon to rescue miners in danger or recover those who perished. The list does not include lesser known events and tasks that mine rescue teams undertake, such as the six coal mine emergencies that occurred in the first eight months of this year at mines in West Virginia, Utah, Colorado, Illinois and Kentucky. In those incidents, mine rescue teams worked to extinguish mine fires, seal or unseal areas of mines.

While we have made significant progress over the years – and even with 2012 being the safest year in mining history – the need for mine rescue preparedness is far from over. History has taught us that rescuers must be ready to respond day or night.

This past, present and future dedicated group of Americans who have placed their own lives at risk to save others are worthy of recognition and honor, and we intend to do just that by recognizing October 30th as “Mine Rescue Day.”

October 30th is a fitting day to recognize mine rescuers. On October 30, 1911—102 years ago—the first national mine rescue contest was held in the United States. It was organized by Dr. Joseph A. Holmes, who in 1910 was appointed as the first director of the U.S. Bureau of Mines by President William Howard Taft. The event was held at Forbes Field in

Pittsburgh, PA, and was attended by Director Holmes and President Taft.

Also, on October 30, 2013, the newly-created Holmes Mine Rescue Association (HMRA) formally comes into existence. Yesterday was truly an historic day when at a meeting held at the National Mine Health and Safety Academy at Beckley, West Virginia, the HMRA membership voted in its leadership team. The team includes a sizable Executive Committee, whose members represent a wide range of mining stakeholders and its first President, Alan Dupree of Alpha Natural Resources. HMRA, which takes MSHA back to its roots and fulfills the original intent of Joseph A. Holmes, will provide a national mine response structure to provide guidance and support mine rescue training and contests.

As we recognize this first Mine Rescue Day, we have progress to celebrate. In 2006, the United States Congress recognized the critical role that the training contests play in preparing rescue teams to respond to emergencies by passing the MINER Act. That legislation resulted in more mine rescue teams that were better trained and prepared for mine emergencies.

However, we knew that more work was needed. In 2010, the mining community began a national effort to improve mine emergency response. As a result, we are building better communication and tracking tools for mine rescue teams, creating a national organization to provide guidance and long-term support for mine rescue and developing state-of-the-art training and emergency command facilities. We owe those who courageously sign on to rescue their compatriots that much.

And so, in recognition of the tremendous effort of those gallant mine rescuers who have given of themselves to bring to safety others, we in

the mining community will from this day forward recognize October 30th as Mine Rescue Day, a day to be set aside to acknowledge and celebrate the courageous mine rescuers, past and present, who put their lives on the line to save other miners. They represent the best of America.