

News Release



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MSHA issues 11 closure orders during surprise inspection at West Virginia coal mine

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration today announced the issuance of 11 closure orders to Elk Run Coal Co.’s Seng Creek Powellton Mine when federal inspectors last week discovered that the mine was taking illegal cuts into the coal seam, operating without proper ventilation and not completing required air readings, which are needed to assure there is sufficient air flow to prevent mine explosions. The mine is owned by Massey Energy Co. and located in Boone County, W.Va.

“This week we mark the six-month anniversary of the devastating explosion at Upper Big Branch Mine,” said Joseph A. Main, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health. “Rather than learn from this tragedy, there are mine operators that continue the ‘catch me if you can’ tactics, ignoring basic mining laws, and placing their workers at great risk of injury, illness and mine explosions. They know that MSHA cannot be at the mines all the time, and miners pay the ultimate price.

“While MSHA will use the full measure of the law to deal with those who persist in refusing to follow the safety and health regulations, the results of the Seng Creek inspection only reinforce the need for new legislation to halt these kinds of practices,” Main added.

Following up on reports that the mine operator had been taking deep cuts, an MSHA supervisor and two inspectors arrived at the mine on Tuesday, Sept. 28, in the middle of the evening shift. The supervisor immediately informed mine personnel not to notify miners underground of their arrival and that they could be cited if they refused to comply. Inspectors discovered the illegal extended cuts into the coal on the No. 1 section. Although deep cuts can greatly boost productivity, they also can increase float coal dust accumulations underground. Thus, such cuts must first be approved by MSHA.

In addition, many areas of the working section were without adequate ventilation while these excessive cuts were being taken, exposing miners to the risk of explosions and black lung. The mine foreman, who is directly responsible for miners’ health and safety and complying with regulatory requirements, admitted he had not been taking air readings during the work shift. Furthermore, he allowed fly pads (backup curtains), which control the ventilation, to be rolled up against the mine roof, which short circuits the mine ventilation to allow easier access of mining equipment. In one particular area, suspended coal dust was so thick it was difficult to determine the proximity of the massive continuous mining machine.

Since January 2009, the Seng Creek Powellton Mine has been issued 264 citations, orders and safeguards. The 11 orders and one citation issued last week ultimately were abated through additional training and installation of ventilation controls and roof supports. The citation was for the operator’s failure to ensure miners wear safety glasses when there is a danger of flying particles.

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