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MSHA announces results of January impact inspections

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration today announced that federal inspectors issued 377 citations and orders during special impact inspections conducted at 15 coal and seven metal/nonmetal mine operations last month. The coal mines were issued 208 citations and seven orders; the metal/nonmetal mines were issued 148 citations and 14 orders.

These inspections, which began in force last April following the explosion at Upper Big Branch Mine, involve mines that merit increased agency attention and enforcement due to their poor compliance history or particular compliance concerns, including high numbers of violations or closure orders; indications of operator tactics, such as advance notification of inspections that prevent inspectors from observing violations; frequent hazard complaints or hotline calls; plan compliance issues; inadequate workplace examinations; a high number of accidents, injuries or illnesses; fatalities; and adverse conditions such as increased methane liberation, faulty roof conditions and inadequate ventilation.

“Some mine operators have begun to show signs of improvement, while others continue to demonstrate poor compliance with safety and health laws,” said Joseph A. Main, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health.

On Jan. 14, an inspection party arrived at Manalapan Mining Co. Inc.’s RB No. 12 Mine in Harlan County, Ky., during the evening shift. The inspectors captured and monitored the phones after production had started to prevent advance notification of their arrival. They issued 24 104(a) citations and three 104(d)(2) orders, the majority of which are related to not examining and maintaining electrical equipment. Such violations may create electrical hazards and potentially expose miners to electrocution. Other violations included accumulations of combustible materials inside a power center and one along a conveyor belt, which could lead to an explosion. Inspectors also found unsafe rib and roof conditions, which could result in a roof fall.

MSHA found three defective and one properly operating handheld multi-gas detectors. One 104(d)(2) order was issued when one of the mine’s pre-shift examiners was encountered in an outby area with his handheld multi-gas detector turned off. When turned on, it was found to be defective. Further investigation revealed the detector had not been calibrated for almost two months. This condition resulted in another 104(d)(2) order, since handheld detectors are required to be calibrated every 31 days. Two other handheld detectors were turned off and had dead batteries. Inoperable, non-calibrated and defective multi-gas detectors increase the risk that explosive mixtures of methane or low oxygen could go undetected, resulting in a mine explosion or unsafe levels of oxygen in the air. A 104(d)(2) order was issued on a front-end loader operated on the surface for allowing combustible materials to accumulate on the engine, exhaust system and other parts.

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Beginning Jan. 19, MSHA inspectors conducted an impact inspection at the Queenstake Resources USA's Jerritt Canyon Mill in Elko County, Nev. They issued 24 citations and seven 104(d)(2) orders. Two of the 104(d)(2) orders were issued in conjunction with a 107(a) imminent danger order. One 104(d)(2) order was issued for the operator's failure to examine each working place at least once per shift for conditions that may adversely affect safety or health. A second 104(d)(2) order was issued in conjunction with a 107(a) order, for operating equipment that posed hazards to miners. A 107(a) order was issued in a lab in which inspectors detected a strong, irritating odor and white mist/vapors coming off a heated tray inside a ventilation hood. A sample was taken immediately, indicating that nitric acid potential exposure was above the established short-term exposure limit. The health risks from overexposure include severe lung damage, such as pulmonary edema.

Since April 2010, MSHA has conducted 220 impact inspections. These inspections have resulted in 4,114 citations, 384 orders and 13 safeguards.

Editor's note: A spreadsheet containing the entire results of January's impact inspections accompanies this news release.

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