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MSHA cites Massey-owned Randolph Mine with multiple citations and orders during impact inspection

‘Conduct and behavior exhibited when we caught mine operator by surprise nothing short of outrageous,’ said MSHA’S Main

ARLINGTON – The U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration today announced that federal inspectors issued 20 withdrawal orders and five citations to Randolph Mine in Boone County, W.Va., during an impact inspection conducted in April. Eleven of the orders were issued for violations of the ventilation plan at the underground coal mine owned by Massey Energy and operated by Inman Energy.

On April 29, six MSHA inspectors arrived at Randolph Mine during the afternoon shift, capturing the phones at both the guard shack and mine office to prohibit mine personnel from notifying miners underground of their presence. The inspectors visited four of the operation’s mechanized mining units during the inspection and observed the following conditions and practices:

- Two sets of mining equipment were simultaneously and illegally engaged in cutting, mining and loading coal and rock from working places within the same working section, and neither set of mining equipment was on a separate split of intake air. This condition exposed miners to respirable dust hazards that could result in permanently disabling injuries such as black lung and other respiratory diseases.
- Combustible materials in the form of loose coal, coal dust and float coal dust were allowed to accumulate in active workings, which can contribute to a mine explosion.
- During the mining process, the continuous miner operator and shuttle car operator were engulfed in visible coal dust from cutting coal and rock while the area was on a reduced dust standard due to excessive quartz.
- Ventilation curtains, which are necessary to provide proper ventilation to prevent mine explosions and black lung, were not being used in certain working areas.
- Water pressure was insufficient on the continuous miner’s water sprays, which suppress dust, and prevent sparking and methane ignitions.

The violations allege that the mine operator engaged in aggravated conduct, constituting more than ordinary negligence, by not following mandatory safety standards, and allowing unsafe and unhealthful mining practices to continue.

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US DEPARTMENT OF LABOR NEWS RELEASE – PAGE 2

“The conduct and behavior exhibited when we caught the mine operator by surprise is nothing short of outrageous,” said Joseph A. Main, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health. “Despite the tragedy at Upper Big Branch last year, and all our efforts to bring mine operators into compliance, some still aren’t getting it. The conditions observed at Randolph Mine place miners at serious risk to the threat of fire, explosion and black lung. Yet, MSHA inspectors can’t be at every mine every day. Our continuing challenge is counteracting the egregious behavior of certain mine operators.”

In March 2010, MSHA received an anonymous complaint about hazardous conditions at Randolph Mine just days after a small fire occurred there. The agency’s inspectors found that the mine operator was not providing adequate ventilation to reduce the risk of explosions and exposure to coal mine dust. Nine 104(d)(2) withdrawal orders were issued for the operator’s failure to provide adequate ventilation, not following the approved ventilation plan by mining depths in excess of the maximum 20 feet, inadequate on-shift examinations and extensive accumulation of loose coal. Inspectors found some sections without air movement caused by line curtains (used to control air flow) being rolled up. These same types of conditions were found again during the April 2011 impact inspection. Section 104(d)(2) of the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977 refers to unwarrantable failure withdrawal orders and requires that an inspection with no similar violations be conducted before the order is terminated.

Impact inspections, which began in force in April 2010 following the explosion at the Upper Big Branch Mine, targets 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.

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