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MSHA announces results of June impact inspections *Mine placed on pattern of violations in 2011 is one of targeted operations*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration today announced that federal inspectors issued 177 citations, 22 orders and one safeguard during special impact inspections conducted at nine coal mines and three metal/nonmetal mines last month.

The monthly inspections, which began in force in April 2010 following the explosion at the 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; 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.

As an example from last month, MSHA conducted an impact inspection on June 21 during the second shift at Bledsoe Coal Corp.’s Abner Branch Rider Mine in Leslie County, Ky. Inspectors immediately seized and monitored the mine’s communications systems to ensure that advance notification was not provided to the miners underground.

The 19 citations and 12 withdrawal orders inspectors issued as a result of violations found effectively shut down the entire mine for eight days. Violations included accumulations of combustible materials in the motor compartment of a utility vehicle located in the primary escapeway; accumulations of loose coal, coal dust, black float coal dust and hydraulic oil on the roof bolting machine, along the mine floor and against the ribs; and an improperly functioning methane monitor, which did not provide a warning or de-energize the mechanized mining unit when necessary. MSHA also cited the operator for defective, bare electrical wires and inadequate splices on the utility vehicle in the primary escapeway. If left uncorrected, these conditions could spark a methane ignition, which, combined with inadequate rockdusting, could cause or contribute to a coal dust explosion.

Additionally, the mine operator did not provide adequate roof/rib control and failed to follow the mine’s approved roof control plan. The operator also failed to identify, record and correct the absence of mesh that would prevent the fall of sections of the mine’s ribs and roof.

On April 12, 2011, MSHA had issued a pattern of violations notice to the Abner Branch Rider Mine, one of only two mines ever to receive such a notice. Since then, the mine has been issued 53 orders.

Last month’s impact inspection was the third conducted at the Abner Branch Rider Mine. The mine’s operations returned to normal on June 29 after the violations were abated and the withdrawal orders terminated.

“The Federal Mine Safety and Health Act requires operators to provide a safe workplace, and that includes finding and fixing hazards in order to keep miners from getting injured or killed. If operators ignore that responsibility and leave it to MSHA to find their problems, they should know that MSHA will use the full force of the law – including closure orders – to protect the nation’s miners,” said Joseph A. Main, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health.

“It is clear that, in the case of Abner Branch, a mine already on a pattern of violations, all of MSHA’s tools may not be enough. But until that changes, we will use what we have and aggressively enforce the law to ensure men and women who go into a mine at the beginning of a shift can come back out at the end of it.”

US DEPARTMENT OF LABOR NEWS RELEASE – PAGE 2

As a second example from last month, MSHA personnel conducted an impact inspection on June 20 at Tunnel Ridge LLC's Tunnel Ridge Mine in Ohio County, W.Va., during the evening shift. The inspection party secured the mine's phones to prevent advance notice of the inspection. MSHA issued 34 enforcement actions, including 29 citations and five unwarrantable failure orders. This impact inspection was the second of the Tunnel Ridge Mine.

An unwarrantable failure order was issued for failure to maintain the intake escapeway on the longwall section from the mine's working face. The escapeway was obstructed with mud and water up to 15 inches deep for a distance of 300 feet. A subsequent order was issued for the mine operator's failure to identify this hazardous condition during the preshift examination. By not recognizing and recording this hazard, the mine operator placed miners at risk of not having a safe way to exit the mine.

The mine operator also was cited for failing to conduct required methane tests at each working face. The Tunnel Ridge Mine has a history of methane liberation. Failure to perform adequate methane checks during the mining and roof bolting cycle could allow an unknown quantity of methane gas to accumulate without miners' knowledge and lead to a possible methane ignition.

An additional order was issued for the mine operator's failure to conduct an adequate preshift examination of the section. Conducting proper examinations and correcting hazardous conditions are essential to protect the health and safety of miners. Inadequate examinations allow miners to remain in areas where hazardous conditions may exist which, if left uncorrected, expose miners to the risk of severe injuries, illnesses or death.

Since April 2010, MSHA has conducted 464 impact inspections, which have resulted in a total of 8,283 citations, 833 orders and 33 safeguards.

Editor's note: A spreadsheet containing the results of impact inspections in June 2012 accompanies this news release.

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