



November 15, 2002 - Non-Injury Surge-Pile Accident at Drummond Company's Shoal Creek Mine, Alabama

The accident occurred when a D9L Caterpillar bulldozer fell into a hidden void on the clean coal surge pile. The incident took place on the evening shift, which runs from 3 PM to 11 PM. The dozer operator was pushing clean coal into feeders. The clean coal pile was 40 to 50 feet high at the time. In the process of pushing coal to the #18 feeder, the operator had passed over the adjacent feeders, #17 and #16, several times. At approximately 5:30 PM, as he passed over the #16 feeder, the coal suddenly gave way and the bulldozer fell backwards approximately 21 feet into a hidden cavity. The machine ended up in a vertical position with the blade pointing upward. Reportedly, the dozer came to rest with the blade just below the top of the pile.

The operator used the dozer's CB radio to contact a foreman, who cautioned him to stay in the cab. At that point, there was some coal on the cab, but coal did not cover the doors. Other dozers were brought to the pile and began pushing coal away from the trapped dozer. Reportedly, during the process of digging out the dozer, coal did end up completely covering the cab. At approximately 6:15 PM, the operator was rescued from the dozer and by 7:30 PM, the dozer had been brought down off the pile. The damage to the dozer was relatively minor. The hoses on the rear-mounted fire-suppression system were torn loose, the backup alarm was damaged, and the steel framing around the rear window was bent inward. The operator was not injured.

Reportedly, the #16 feeder, that had the bridged condition, had not been active during the shift. There was uncertainty about when the #16 feeder had last been used. The Drummond Company had implemented a number of surge-pile safety measures, which were instrumental in preventing the accident from being more serious. Safety measures in place at the time of the accident included the following:

- high-strength glass in the dozer cab windows;
- a radio-signal system provided a warning when the dozer began to become buried in the pile;
- feeder locations identified with overhead markers;
- feeder-operation indicator lights used to show the dozer operators which feeders were active;
- dozer cabs provided with radio communications, a self-contained self rescuer and a flashlight inside the cab;

- a closed-circuit TV camera monitoring system with a monitor in the preparation plant's control room;
- written surge-pile safety procedures calling for feeder operators to communicate with equipment operators prior to starting or switching feeders;
- dozer operator safety procedures required dozer operators to notify plant personnel "when a withdrawal cone had not been visually identified for an operating feeder."