

**Remarks of Assistant Secretary of Labor  
for Mine Safety and Health  
Joseph A. Main  
Commemoration of 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of  
1969  
Washington, DC  
March 23, 2010**

**From Tragedy to Triumph**

On a cold November morning in 1968 a terrible tragedy occurred in the hills of West Virginia that profoundly changed mine safety and health in the United States forever. The explosion at Consolidation Coal's No. 9 mine in Farmington set in motion a unified effort to end the toll being taken on the lives our nation's miners.

The lives that were shattered, the lives that were lost, the grief of the families, the community and the nation – all coalesced into a common determination to do something so that terrible tragedies like this would not happen again.

Like many others working in the mining industry 40 years ago, I remember those dreadful days and news of workers desperately trying to reach miners missing after the explosion.

Congress, too, acted on this sense of urgency, and out of this tragedy, the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969 was born.

**The Coal Act of 1969**

The Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969 was a watershed moment in occupational safety and health law in this nation. It instituted the strongest and most comprehensive occupational safety and health protections that had ever been enacted in the U.S.

It greatly increased the government's enforcement powers in coal mines, both underground and surface.

It also set the standard for four annual inspections for underground mines, instituted mandatory fines for all violations, and allowed criminal penalties for knowing and willful violations.

And, the 1969 act strengthened safety standards and established health standards, including regulating the amount of respirable coal dust in underground coal mines – and, for the first time, provided government benefits for miners disabled by black lung.

## **Black Lung**

For too long, coal miners have contracted, suffered and died from the black lung disease. There have been efforts to reduce and eliminate the scourge of black lung. Some have been more successful than others, but none have yet accomplished the goal of ending black lung.

It is my goal to deliver on the promise of the 1969 Coal Mine Act to prevent new black lung cases and prevent further progression of black lung among miners who already suffer.

In December I announced the start of an intensive initiative that I believe will achieve our goal of ending black lung.

“END BLACK LUNG – ACT NOW!” is a comprehensive effort that involves the entire coal mining community and includes education and training for miners, miners’ representatives, supervisors, and operators; enhanced enforcement of respirable dust standards; effective use of available dust control technology; and regulatory improvements to reduce miners’ exposure to respirable coal mine dust.

With this effort to combat black lung, we intend to fulfill the promise of the Coal Mine Act that “The first priority and concern of all in the coal mining industry must be the health and safety of its most precious resource – the miner.”

## **40 Years of Progress**

As someone who has been involved in mining for more than four decades, I have seen first hand the vast improvements in mining practices and the great advancements in technology that have played a critical role in making our nation’s mines safer and healthier places to work.

Throughout the years, we have made progress; there are fewer fatalities, fewer injuries, and fewer cases of occupational illness in the mines in this country today than there were in 1969.

We have seen steady progress and the numbers tell the story. In the 40 years *since* the enactment of the Coal Mine Act, the average number of miners who died in coal mines fell by 90%.

But we still see too many fatalities, too many injuries, too much occupational illness. One death is one too many – the loss of even one miner profoundly affects families, friends, communities, colleagues, employers. A traumatic injury can change a miner’s life forever. And occupational illnesses can and do disable miners, affect their quality of life, and shorten their lifespans.

## **Cautious celebration, solemn remembrance**

This afternoon we heard of tragedy and loss, of triumphs and milestones. And we have heard first hand accounts of how the Farmington disaster and the resulting legislation have made a real difference in the lives of many and helped transform an industry.

So today is a moment of cautious celebration and solemn remembrance.

Forty years ago, the course of mining safety and health was changed forever – and for that we celebrate. The Coal Mine Act of 1969 is a landmark piece of legislation which has led to enormous improvements in mining practices and the way miners are protected. We want to build on this success and continue to improve mine safety and health. We can do better – and we will.

And we will remember. We remember the 78 miners, the thousands of other miners who perished while mining coal and those who died and suffered from the debilitating effects of exposure to respirable coal mine dust – their lives bring us together in this great hall today. It is their sacrifice – and the sacrifices of their families and friends, of their colleagues and communities – that will continue to inspire us to strive for safer mines and more healthful mining workplaces so that miners will go to work every day and come home every day safe, healthy and whole.

Out of tragedy, a strong law was born. We celebrate the law, we rejoice in the results – and we mourn those who died to make it possible.

It has been said that out of tragedy comes triumph. And though we made tremendous progress over the past four decades, we're not quite ready to claim victory. However, achieving zero fatalities in U.S. mining is a real possibility. We must work together to prevent fatalities, injuries and occupational illnesses in our nation's mines.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you once again for taking the time and making the commitment to come here today. I look forward to working with you to continue the progress of the last 40 years and I know that we can continue making great changes over the next 40 years... Miners' lives are depending on it.