



July 31, 2013

Dear Stakeholder,

From January 1 to June 30, 2013, 18 miners died in accidents in the mining industry. Nine were killed in coal mining accidents and nine in metal and nonmetal mining accidents. In both coal and metal and nonmetal mining, one of the miners killed was a contractor. The number of miners that died in mining accidents the first half of 2013 was one less than the first half in 2012. While actions undertaken by the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and the mining industry continue to move mine safety in the right direction, these deaths are a reminder that much more needs to be done to protect the Nation's miners. We continue to see fatalities occur that are preventable.

Congress explicitly stated in the findings and purpose of the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977, as amended (Mine Act) that "deaths and serious injuries from unsafe and unhealthful conditions and practices in the coal or other mines cause grief and suffering to the miners and to their families ..." Congress clearly sought to end this grief and suffering. That Mine Act also makes clear that "mine operators, with the assistance of miners, have the primary responsibility to prevent the existence of such conditions and practices."

The following provides more details on mining deaths that have occurred so far this year. In coal mining, eight of the fatalities occurred in the first quarter of the year and one occurred in the second quarter. Two miners died in machinery accidents. Three miners were killed in powered haulage accidents, and two miners died as a result of roof fall accidents. One miner died in an accident resulting from exploding vessels under pressure, and one miner was killed in a hoisting accident. Eight of the fatalities occurred in underground mines; one was at a surface mine. The deaths were not isolated to certain occupations. Seven occupations were represented among the nine miners killed. Two of the powered haulage deaths may have been prevented through the use of proximity detection systems.

In metal and nonmetal mining, three of the fatalities occurred in the first quarter of the year and six occurred in the second quarter. One miner died as a result of a fall of highwall. One miner died in a machinery accident and one miner died in accident involving explosives and breaking agents. Four miners died in powered haulage accidents, and two miners died in falling material accidents. Three of the fatalities occurred at underground mines; six were at surface mines. Three of the miners were mechanics, and two of the miners were supervisors.

Some of the types of fatal accidents that we have seen in the past are notably absent in this midyear report – fall of person fatalities and rib fall fatalities. Both of these areas have been topics of outreach and education efforts by MSHA to the mining community. MSHA issued a Program Policy Letter in June 2012 clarifying MSHA’s metal and nonmetal standards and stating the compliance with OSHA fall protection standard in many cases will satisfy MSHA’s requirements. In coal this year, there have been no rib fall fatalities, compared to two last year. MSHA annually conducts the Preventive Roof/Rib Outreach Program and the Winter Alert Program, emphasizing the risk of rib fall and other hazards, and preventative measures to keep accidents and fatalities from happening.

One area where MSHA has recently placed significant emphasis is on conducting workplace examinations. Effective pre-shift, supplemental, on-shift and weekly examinations are the first line of defense to protect miners working in underground coal mines, and we can remove many of the conditions that can injure or kill miners by identifying and correcting those conditions earlier. Improved examinations will better protect our nation’s miners from injury and death.

Conducting these examinations is especially important in light of the fact that eight of the nine coal mining deaths that occurred in the first half of this year were at underground coal mines. Last August, MSHA’s final rule on Examinations of Work Areas in Underground Coal Mines for Violations of Mandatory Health or Safety Standards became effective. As a reminder of the importance of the rule and its intent, coal inspectors on July 1, 2013, began an educational outreach program where they will be talking to operators and examiners about the intent and requirements of the rule, and ensuring that examiners are hearing about violations MSHA is citing at the mine as required by the rule.

The rule requires mine operators to identify and correct hazardous conditions, including violations of nine health and safety standards that pose the greatest risk to miners.

Another key tool to prevent fatalities in underground coal mines is the use of proximity detection systems. As of June 30, 2013, 340 proximity detection systems had been installed on mining machines in underground coal mines including continuous mining machines, coal hauling machines, and scoops. Of those 340 proximity detection systems, 252 are on continuous mining machines and 88 are on other mobile machines. There also are other best practices, as described in the fatality summary section on MSHA’s website, which should be applied to prevent crushing injuries and fatalities from occurring.

In metal/nonmetal, fatalities continue to occur that could be prevented using Lock Out Tag Out best practices. Two of the fatalities could have been prevented by disconnecting the power and assuring it is off, having each miner on the job lock the power source in the safe position, using his or her personal safety lock and tag to prevent the power from being re-energized.

Miners deserve a safe and healthful workplace, and assurances they can return home safe and healthy each day. No miner should have to die on the job just to earn a paycheck. We must all work together to ensure that does not happen.

An analysis of these mining fatalities is available at <http://www.msha.gov/fatals/summaries/summaries.asp> along with best practices to help mining operations avoid fatalities like them, and for trainers to include in miner training.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joseph A. Main". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Joseph A. Main  
Assistant Secretary of Labor for  
Mine Safety and Health