

From the Assistant Secretary's Desk – Updating the National Stone, Sand & Gravel Association

Earlier this week, I had the opportunity to meet with the National Stone, Sand & Gravel Association (NSSGA) and update them on actions taken by MSHA as well as mining stakeholders to improve mine safety and health -- and the results. The NSSGA represents companies that produce more than 90 percent of the crushed stone and 70 percent of the sand and gravel consumed annually in the United States.

These actions included many initiatives MSHA began in 2010, such as Rules to Live By, which focuses on the most common causes of mining deaths; special enforcement actions including the impact inspections of problem mines; and the "Pattern of Violations" (POV) program targeting chronic violators.

We believe these reforms and other actions have contributed to a steady path of improvement since 2010. The impact inspection and POV initiatives has resulted in improved compliance, reduced injuries and led to an 83 percent reduction in the number of chronic violators. Throughout this period, MSHA has worked with stakeholders and listened to identify areas to improve compliance and miners' safety and health. The results have been positive. Outreach on better guidance on guarding standards resulted in a 40 percent improvement in compliance. Since the publication of a Program Policy Letter recognizing the Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards on fall protection fall protection violations have dropped 25 percent. MSHA also issued a policy letter recognizing OSHA's hazard communication standard and, just last month, rolled out a new ladder safety training tool .

In addition, MSHA completed nearly 100 actions based on recommendations identified by the internal review of the 2010 Upper Big Branch mine disaster; helped create the Holmes Mine Rescue Association; reformed coal, metal and nonmetal mine rescue training contests; improved enforcement of workplace safety discrimination cases; and significantly reduced the backlog of cases pending before the Federal Mine Safety and Health Review Commission, from a peak of more than 89,000 contested violations in 2010 to about 31,000 in 2013. From 2010 through 2013, compliance improved each year, with an end result of a 25 percent decrease in violations in the metal and nonmetal mining industry.

Fatality and injury rates – the most important measures in safety and health -- have followed this trend. The industry as a whole achieved the lowest fatality and injury rates in the history of mining in 2011 and again in 2012, a trend that continued through FY 2013. However, in the last quarter of 2013, there were nine metal and nonmetal mining deaths, a trend that MSHA is working to reverse.

It has taken the entire mining community to achieve these positive results, making mines safer for those who choose the occupation of a miner. The last quarter of 2013 however is a stark reminder of how much more needs to be done to protect the nation's miners.