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Mining deaths rise in 2010

MSHA chief pledges continued enforcement, outreach on behalf of nation's miners

ARLINGTON, Va. – Mining fatalities in the United States significantly increased in 2010, following a year marked by the fewest deaths in mining history, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration. Seventy-one miners died on the job last year, compared to 34 in 2009. Forty-eight of those deaths occurred in coal mines, and 23 occurred at metal and nonmetal operations.

Of the 71 mining fatalities reported, 23 of those victims were killed in surface mining accidents, while 48 miners died in underground mining accidents, 29 of whom were killed in the explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine in April. The leading cause of coal mining deaths was ignition or explosion, followed by powered haulage and roof falls. The leading cause of metal/nonmetal mining deaths was powered haulage, followed by falling or sliding material, and machinery.

“While 2010 will be remembered for the explosion that killed 29 men at the Upper Big Branch mine, we are mindful that 42 additional miners' lives also ended in tragedy,” said Joseph A. Main, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health. “Increasing our efforts to ensure a safe and healthy workplace for our nation's miners is the best way to honor the memory of those who died.

“First and foremost, mine operators must take responsibility for the health and safety conditions in their mines to prevent these tragedies,” Main added. “Mining deaths are preventable, and actions must be undertaken to prevent them.”

MSHA has taken a number of actions to identify mines with safety issues, and has initiated a number of outreach and enforcement initiatives, including “Rules to Live By,” a fatality prevention program spotlighting the safety and health standards most frequently cited during fatal accident investigations. That information is available on the MSHA website at <http://www.msha.gov/focuson/rulestoliveby.asp>.

In addition, MSHA engaged in a number of targeted enforcement, awareness, outreach and rulemaking activities in 2010 to reduce the number of mining fatalities, accidents and illnesses. These efforts include:

- A monthly round of aggressively targeted impact inspections at mines with a history of significant and/or repeat violations, poor compliance records, and high numbers of closure orders, accidents, injuries, illnesses or fatalities. Between April and December 2010, MSHA conducted 200 impact inspections and issued 4,142 citations, orders and safeguards.
- New screening criteria and tougher procedures for the pattern of violations enforcement program, which gives the agency additional enforcement tools to use at mines with a history of violating safety standards, and notification of 14 mines for potential pattern of violations.

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-- First-time use under the federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977 to seek injunctive action against the most recalcitrant mine operators, resulting in a settlement requiring specific safety measures to be applied to the mine.

-- New enforcement policies and alert bulletins addressing specific hazards or problems such as prohibitions on advanced notice of MSHA inspections, mine ventilation requirements to prevent mine explosions, and miners' rights to report hazards without being subject to retaliation.

-- A roof fall prevention awareness program aimed at reducing the high number of roof falls that occur in the nation's underground coal mines

-- A pilot program aimed at addressing the backlog of contested citations and the agency's conferencing procedures at the Mine Safety and Health Review Commission.

-- Issuance of a new emergency temporary standard for rock dust, which would strengthen miners' protections and minimize the potential for coal dust explosions by requiring a higher percentage of inert rock dust in underground coal mines.

-- A safety initiative calling special attention to the potential dangers that shuttle cars and scoops pose in underground coal mines pose to miners, a leading cause of miner injury and death.

-- A new, proposed rule that would expand requirements at underground coal mines requiring mine operators to conduct pre-shift, supplemental, on-shift and weekly examinations to determine compliance with mandatory health and safety standards.

-- A two-part, comprehensive action plan to tackle black lung, which encompassed education, enhanced enforcement, training and rulemaking, including publication of a proposed rule on lowering miners' exposure to respirable coal dust to end black lung disease among miners.

“No miners should have to die on the job just to earn a paycheck,” said Main. “MSHA will vigorously enforce the Mine Act, and look for ways to improve our policies and regulations to prevent these unnecessary deaths and provide miners the opportunity to return home safe at the end of every shift,” said Main.

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