

News Release



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MSHA appoints team to investigate Upper Big Branch South Mine explosion

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration has appointed a team to investigate the April 5 explosion at the Upper Big Branch South Mine (Performance Coal Co.) in Whitesville, W.Va.

“Twenty-five hardworking men died unnecessarily in a mine Monday,” said Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis. “The very best way we can honor them is to do our job. MSHA’s investigation team is committed to finding out what happened, and we will take action.”

“The investigation team will work tirelessly to evaluate all aspects of this accident to identify the cause of the disaster,” said Assistant Secretary of Labor for MSHA Joseph A. Main.

A team of MSHA mine safety professionals from outside the district responsible for enforcement at the Upper Big Branch South Mine will evaluate all aspects of the accident, including potential causes and the operator’s compliance with federal health and safety standards. A formal report to be issued by MSHA will summarize the findings and conclusions of the investigative team, identifying root causes of the accident and how the incident unfolded. Any contributing violations of federal mine safety standards that existed will be cited at the conclusion of the investigation.

The Upper Big Branch Accident Investigation Team is being led by Norman Page, district manager of MSHA’s District 6 in Pikeville, Ky. Page has held a number of positions in his 25-year career with the agency, including mine inspector, ventilation/roof specialist, ventilation supervisor, roof control supervisor and assistant district manager. Page has participated in numerous accident investigations.

Other team members from MSHA’s staff include Timothy Watkins, assistant district manager of District 6; Ben Harding, staff assistant of District 5 (Virginia); Erik Sherer, coal mine safety and health mining engineer from the headquarters office; Alvin Brown, program analyst of District 7 (Kentucky); Dave Steffey, mining engineer of District 6; Jerry Vance, educational field services specialist from Educational Policy and Development; and Jasey Maggard, electrical supervisor of District 7. Rich Stoltz, supervisory general engineer, Ventilation Division; Clete Stephan, general engineer, Ventilation Division; Tom Morley, mining engineer, Ventilation Division; and Sandin Phillipson, geologist, Roof Control Division in the agency’s Office of Technical Support also will assist in the investigation.

Additionally, Derek Baxter and Dana Ferguson, trial attorneys for the Labor Department’s Office of the Solicitor, are on the team.

MSHA’s mission is to administer the provisions of the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977, as amended by the Mine Improvement and New Emergency Response Act of 2006, and to enforce compliance with mandatory safety and health standards as a means to eliminate fatal accidents; to reduce the frequency and severity of nonfatal accidents; to minimize health hazards; and to promote improved safety and health conditions in the nation’s mines.

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