

News Release



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MSHA announces series of public meetings to bolster transparency in investigation of Upper Big Branch Mine explosion

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration today announced it plans to hold two public hearings, two public forums and a public comment period as part of its overall federal investigation into the April 5 explosion at the Upper Big Branch Mine in Raleigh County, W.Va.

“This approach is being driven by a commitment to learn what caused the explosion that claimed 29 miners’ lives, a commitment to transparency and openness, and a commitment to ensure that MSHA’s investigation does not impede any potential or ongoing criminal investigations into the blast,” said Joseph A. Main, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health.

MSHA plans to convene the following public meetings so that the victims’ families, the mining community and the general public can learn what happened:

- A public hearing in which miners, contractors, mine officials and others with knowledge of the workings of the mine are asked to testify. MSHA will use its subpoena power if necessary.
- A public hearing in which the technical aspects of the leading theory or theories as to what caused the explosion are examined. This would include a presentation by MSHA investigators as well as testimony by outside experts to test those theories.
- A public forum in which the family members of the deceased have an opportunity to express their thoughts about the explosion, the response, the investigation and potential reforms in mine safety and health laws.
- A town hall meeting designed to promote the exchange of ideas on how best to create a culture of safety at mining operations and to gather recommendations on how to improve mine safety moving forward.
- A public comment period that will allow interested members of the public to offer their comments and to have those comments considered by investigators prior to the completion of the official accident investigation report.

At all times, however, MSHA will take steps to ensure that its activities do not risk interfering with any potential or ongoing criminal investigation and may have to adjust its proceedings accordingly.

“I am confident that from the wide range of public meetings and internal and independent investigations, we will learn what happened at the Upper Big Branch Mine so that we can prevent another such tragedy from occurring,” said Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis.

Prior to and in preparation for the public hearings, MSHA and the state of West Virginia will conduct a physical examination of the mine and private interviews of miners, mining officials and others with knowledge and information about the disaster. The contents of these investigative interviews will be made public at the conclusion of the interview process, unless an interviewee requests confidentiality or it would otherwise jeopardize a potential criminal investigation. In addition, MSHA has established a confidential hotline to allow those with information relevant to the investigation to provide it to investigators. ###

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