

Sago Mine Rescue Effort – Questions and Answers

Question: Is it true that no one could reach federal mine safety officials on January 2nd because it was a holiday?

Answer: No. MSHA office telephone systems provide messages listing emergency telephone numbers during non-business hours. This listing provides an ample number of names and numbers to ensure that a contact can always be made. Mining operators frequently contact MSHA personnel at their homes during off duty hours to report accidents and to discuss other important mining issues.

Question: What delay was there, if any, between the time that people at the mine tried to reach MSHA personnel and the time that someone was actually reached?

Answer: According to MSHA logs, the first call from the mine to MSHA personnel at home came at approximately 8:10 a.m. The first two calls were made to individuals who were out of town. The third call to MSHA was received by Jim Satterfield, Field Office Supervisor, at 8:30 a.m. and he responded immediately.

Question: What time elapsed between when MSHA personnel were reached and when MSHA personnel arrived at the mine site?

Answer: Approximately two hours elapsed. The supervisor was contacted at his home at approximately 8:30 a.m. He made initial telephone calls to obtain support and assistance from other MSHA personnel and then traveled to the Bridgeport office to pick up his mining apparel and a government vehicle. The travel time from his home to the MSHA office was approximately 10 minutes and the travel time from the MSHA office to the mine was approximately 60 minutes. MSHA arrived on site at approximately 10:30 a.m.

Question: What took so long for rescue personnel to enter the mine?

Answer: A mine explosion had occurred and methane gas appeared to be the fuel. Initial instrument readings at the mine portals indicated that 500 ppm of carbon monoxide and 1 ½ % concentration of methane were exiting the mine via the ventilation current. Carbon monoxide is an indicator of a possible fire and methane is

an explosive gas. The gas readings collected were indicators that it was not safe to send people into the mine because of the potential for a second explosion. Safe entry into the mine could not be accomplished until trending of the carbon monoxide and methane gases indicated an active fire was not present.

Question: Some claim that the existing rescue team structure is simply deficient. Is that true?

Answer: Rescue teams have always been an elite aspect of the coal industry. These rescue teams are either company teams, contract teams or teams run by state agencies. MSHA regulations specify that mine rescue stations must be within two hours ground travel of a coal mine and that two teams present themselves at the mine within a reasonable time. Although several mining companies have numerous mine rescue teams, most mining operations only have the minimum coverage defined in the regulations. Teams are expensive to create and maintain, thus the number of teams in excess of regulatory requirements is dependent upon the economy of the industry. There was no shortage of highly-trained, experienced mine rescue resources at the Sago Mine. At one point, there were 13 teams on site assisting with the rescue effort.

Question: What are the federal requirements for mine rescue teams?

Answer: Each mine must establish two mine rescue teams that are available at all times when miners are underground, or the operator must enter into arrangements for mine rescue services that ensure that two teams are available whenever miners are underground. Teams must be properly trained and provided with appropriate safety equipment. Mine rescue coverage can be obtained in several ways, such as company teams, contract teams or through state agencies.

Question: What is the required response time for rescue teams? Is there are different standard for company-maintained teams or federal teams?

Answer: Federal regulations require that each mine rescue station must be within two hours ground travel of the mine or mines it serves. Company mine rescue teams or contract teams that have an arrangement with the mine must present themselves at the mine within a reasonable time after an accident.

There is no required response time for federal mine rescue teams as the law does not require MSHA to separately maintain such teams. MSHA trains and maintains a

number of working team members to accompany industry mine rescue personnel during the exploration activities associated with mine explosions and fires. An MSHA team member accompanies industry and state agency teams in underground areas of the mine. He/She serves as MSHA's representative to ascertain the conditions initially found in the mine, to offer technical assistance and guidance, and to validate information for the accident investigation team.

Question: How many teams responded to the incident?

Answer: A total of 13 teams responded to the Sago Mine disaster.

Question: How many were on site within particular intervals?

Answer: Two teams from Barbour County, WV, were on-site by noon. These are the two teams that the company made arrangements to have available. Initial reports indicate that the Consolidation Coal teams and the Tri-State teams began to arrive at approximately 1:00 pm. Additional teams continued to respond on a voluntary basis as the event unfolded, with a total of 13 being at the site.

Question: What happened to the mine rescue robot?

Answer: The robot had been in Knoxville, Tennessee being repaired on January 2nd, 2006. MSHA chose to stop the repairs and bring it to the site as quickly as possible to assist in the recovery. The robot experienced problems affecting its mobility and ability to gather mine atmosphere information, and was therefore quickly set aside without any loss of time for the rescue teams.

Question: Why don't we have better mine rescue technology?

Answer: Mine rescue teams are expensive, and most companies and teams focus on maintaining the instruments, apparatus equipment they currently have. Development and deployment of new technologies is to some degree dependent on market conditions.