

News Release



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More mining operations undergoing enhanced inspections ***MSHA continues to target mines where unsafe practices and conditions are suspected***

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration today announced the outcome of recent impact inspections at four underground coal mining operations in three states where unsafe practices and conditions are suspected. In each case, federal inspectors commandeered company phones to prevent surface personnel from notifying workers underground of MSHA’s presence on the property. These inspections occurred during shifts when MSHA enforcement personnel were least expected. The inspectors found numerous violations including failure to follow the mine’s approved ventilation plan, inadequate roof support, and accumulation of combustible materials.

“It is appalling that our inspectors continue to find such egregious violations, especially with the explosion at Upper Big Branch still fresh in everyone’s minds,” said Joseph A. Main, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health. “MSHA will continue to target mines with enhanced inspections where conditions merit such actions, particularly at mines that display a disregard to miners’ safety and health.

On July 30, MSHA inspectors issued 27 citations and 11 orders to Wilcoal Mining Inc.’s Tri-State One Mine in Claiborne County, Tenn. Among the violations they discovered were mining without a curtain to direct ventilation and mining into an area of unsupported roof. At the time of the inspection, Wilcoal was mining 105-foot-deep cuts without a line curtain, clearly in violation of their approved ventilation plan that requires line curtain to be installed and maintained within 20 feet of the face. These conditions can contribute to explosions and black lung. The operator had mined into an area without necessary roof support, putting miners further at risk from roof falls.

Orders also were issued for inadequate pre-shift and electrical examinations. The operator did not comply with a wide range of standards and demonstrated overall noncompliance with mine safety and health regulations intended to protect miners and provide for safe and healthful working conditions. Because of the extent of the violations and hazards coupled with the mine’s past history of poor compliance, MSHA issued a 107(a) order requiring the operator to submit an action plan as to how they would proceed to correct the hazards. The mine operator presented an action plan, made the necessary corrective actions, and has been allowed to resume normal operations.

On Aug. 13, an inspection at K&D Mining Inc., Mine No. 17 in Harlan County, Ky., resulted in the issuance of 15 citations and five orders. These enforcement actions were related to ventilation, roof control, accumulation of combustible materials, damaged belt rollers and pre-shift examinations. The inspectors found the mine producing coal using unsafe equipment, including a conveyor belt with a bad bearing and an installed water hose to cool the shaft during operation. The tail-roller shaft had worn completely through the bearing housing and was beginning to cut the frame of the tail-piece. The guard also was removed, creating potential entanglement and amputation hazards.

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Additional unsafe conditions were discovered that could lead to roof falls. Ventilation controls, intended to prevent explosions and lung disease, were not properly installed and used. After correcting all the hazardous conditions, the mine resumed operations Aug. 16.

That same day, MSHA inspectors issued 21 citations and 10 orders to Maple Eagle No. 1 Mine in Fayette County, W.Va. The 10 unwarrantable failure orders closed numerous areas of the mine. A violation is classified as an unwarrantable failure if the mine operator has engaged in aggravated conduct constituting more than ordinary negligence.

Since October 2009 and prior to this inspection, the operator had been issued 336 citations, 21 orders and three safeguards which encompassed a wide range of MSHA standards. In that same timeframe, the mine reported eight accidents, including four roof falls, two accidents requiring medical treatment, and two lost-time accidents.

During the most recent inspection, inspectors found numerous violations such as: failure to rock dust, improperly supported mine roof, failure to maintain a lifeline in safe condition, failure to maintain the primary escapeway, failure to follow the approved ventilation plan, and coal dust accumulation. MSHA ordered closure of sections of the mine because of the mine operator's failure to conduct adequate examinations. Workplace examinations in a mine are the fundamental tools in which hazards are detected and corrected prior to workers working or traveling in those areas. Failures such as these usually are indicators that an operator may not have an effective health and safety program at its mine.

On Aug. 19 and 20, an inspection was conducted at ICG Knott County LLC, Classic Mine in Knott County, Ky., which resulted in the issuance of 42 citations and one order. Citations primarily were issued for violations relating to ventilation, roof control, combustible materials on electrical face equipment and along the conveyor belts, misaligned conveyor belts, and examinations and maintenance of electrical equipment standards. Additional citations were issued for safety violations on non-permissible personnel carriers.

Inspectors also noted that the line curtain used to ventilate the work area measured 72 feet from the working face, where 44 feet is the approved distance in the ventilation plan. They also found dust controls that were not operational and air quantities that were in violation of the approved ventilation plans.

A 104(d)(2) order was issued for the operator's failure to fully comply with the approved ventilation plan. This order closed the entire mine, including two continuous miner production units operating side by side and sharing the same loading point. The operator was required to revise the mine's ventilation plan. MSHA will review those plan revisions and their implementation before production can resume at the mine.

"The conditions found at these mines, discovered when MSHA worked to thwart any advance notice, underscores the importance of the program information bulletins on ventilation the agency recently circulated throughout the mining industry, as well as the need for the legislative reforms pending before Congress," Main added.

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