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MSHA announces results of February impact inspections *5 coal mines selected based on frequent hazard complaints*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration today announced that federal inspectors issued 253 citations and orders during special impact inspections conducted at 15 coal mines and two metal/nonmetal mines last month. The coal mines were issued 235 citations and eight orders, while the metal/nonmetal operations were issued 23 citations and six orders.

Five of the coal mines were selected in part because of frequent hazard complaints. Investigations of 20 anonymous complaints between March 1, 2011, and March 1, 2012, at these five mines resulted in citations being issued when allegations in 12 of the complaints proved true.

These inspections, which began in force in April 2010 following the explosion at the Upper Big Branch Mine, involve mines that merit increased agency attention and enforcement due to their poor compliance history or particular compliance concerns, including high numbers of violations or closure orders; frequent hazard complaints or hotline calls; plan compliance issues; inadequate workplace examinations; a high number of accidents, injuries or illnesses; fatalities; and adverse conditions such as increased methane liberation, faulty roof conditions and inadequate ventilation.

As an example from last month, MSHA conducted an impact inspection on Feb. 28 at Glen Alum Operations LLC’s Upper Cedar Grove No. 4 Mine near Wharncliffe, W.Va., in response to an anonymous complaint submitted the previous day. The complaint alleged that 11 unsafe conditions relating to electrical, roof control and combustible material hazards existed underground. Inspectors issued 23 citations and three orders, 14 of which were designated significant and substantial.

The first violation cited by inspectors occurred when an employee called underground to provide advance notification of the inspectors’ presence. The gravity of this violation was magnified by the number of violations and hazardous conditions encountered in the mine, so the initial citation was subsequently modified.

One closure order was issued for inadequate permissibility examinations on electrical equipment, and two unwarrantable failure orders were issued for inadequate preshift inspections of the section and belt conveyor entries. MSHA also found and cited conditions such as inadequate or missing firefighting equipment, improper maintenance of dust suppression sprays on the continuous mining machine, accumulations of combustible material, electrical violations, equipment that was in an unsafe operating condition and missing lifeline reflectors.

“Due to the recent rash of fatalities at coal surface facilities, the majority of last month’s impact inspections focused on surface operations,” said Joseph A. Main, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health. “I am disturbed about the continuation of advance notice of mine inspections,” he added. “It appears that current penalties are not sufficient to deter this type of conduct.”

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As a second example from last month, an impact inspection was conducted during the day shift on Feb. 9 at Clintwood Elkhorn Mining Inc.'s Laurel Branch Surface Mine in Hurley, Va. The inspection team issued 32 citations, 22 of which were designated as significant and substantial. Upon arriving at the mine, MSHA inspectors reviewed its examination records and inspected highwalls, explosive magazines and 33 pieces of equipment. They issued 11 citations for accumulations of combustible materials – including oil, hydraulic fluids and/or coal dust – on the engine compartments of front end loaders, excavators, dozers and trucks.

Laurel Branch also failed to maintain effective drill dust control on three drills used in the coal seam pit. The inspector observed large plumes of dust emitting from the doors on the dust box, between the drill steel and chip deflector, and from the flap of the broken drill skirt. These conditions exposed the powder crew, located 40 feet away, to high silica rock dust as well as the risk of developing silicosis and other respiratory impairments.

The operator was cited four times for not properly maintaining dry chemical fire suppression systems and fire extinguishers in a usable and operative condition on dozers. Laurel Branch relied upon its contractor, Logan Corp., to properly check these fire suppression systems. As a result, MSHA cited the contractor twice for failure to examine and maintain firefighting equipment. These conditions, in combination with heat generated by engine, transmission, battery and fuel pump components, exposed mobile equipment operators to fire and smoke inhalation hazards.

Since April 2010, MSHA has conducted 420 impact inspections, which have resulted in a total of 7,420 citations, 732 orders and 26 safeguards.

Editor's note: A spreadsheet containing the results of impact inspections in February 2012 accompanies this news release.

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