

# News Release



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Contact: Amy Louviere  
Phone: 202-693-9423

## **Underground investigation of Upper Big Branch Mine begins**

**ARLINGTON, Va.** – The U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration today announced that the federal team investigating the April 5 explosion at the Upper Big Branch Mine will begin its underground examination early next week, following a walk-through today and June 28. Investigators previously had been prevented from beginning their physical probe underground due to conditions resulting from the explosion.

On June 24, mine rescue teams wrapped up a nearly month-long effort to explore the mine and ensure that it was safe for investigators to proceed underground. During that time, MSHA, the state and the mine company engaged in a series of mine rehabilitation efforts, including drilling boreholes and repairing damaged ventilation systems. Rescue teams also discovered an active hot spot and several previous hot spots during their exploration of the mine that may have accounted for high concentrations of toxic gases.

“A critical component of this investigation has now begun,” said Joseph A. Main, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health. “Along with the already extensive witness interviews that have been conducted, the physical examination of the mine hopefully will provide answers to the cause of a tragic explosion that has affected so many lives.”

The underground investigation will consist of several different teams with specific expertise: mapping, dust survey, electrical, photography, flames and forces, geologic and evidence gathering.

The federal agency, along with West Virginia’s Office of Miners’ Health Safety & Training, has outlined specific protocols to ensure the preservation of evidence. All team members will follow these protocols to ensure the integrity and confidence of the evidence collected in the mine:

The members of each team will remain together at all times while inside the mine. They are permitted to take notes during the investigation. One map only will be produced by each mapping team for each area of the mine and will be distributed to each party at the conclusion of each shift.

MSHA representatives will collect evidence such as mine dust samples and will take steps to ensure that evidence is not disturbed during the sampling or mapping process. Samples are to be taken out of the mine at the end of each shift. These samples will be transferred to MSHA investigators on the Evidence Gathering Team, which will store all samples in a secure location.

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All evidence will be identified by MSHA and OMSH&T investigators and collected by the Evidence Gathering Team. After a Photography Team photographs the designated evidence, the Evidence Gathering Team will place the evidence in containers for removal from the mine. Upon removal, the evidence will be placed in a secure location on the surface area of the mine for transport to storage or testing facilities. All parties will be notified of any tests to be conducted on evidence and given an opportunity to attend the testing.

Since the formation of the Upper Big Branch Mine accident investigation team two months ago, it has completed approximately 100 interviews of individuals who may have knowledge of the mine, its conditions and events leading up to the explosion.

MSHA will hold a series of public hearings to further understand the cause of the explosion that resulted in the deaths of 29 miners. Following the public hearings and other public events, MSHA will issue a formal report on the cause of the explosion.

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