

New accident claims two more West Virginia coal miners

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Tragedy again gripped the coalfields of West Virginia on Saturday, as the bodies of two miners trapped since Thursday night by a fire were recovered at the Alma No. 1 Mine in Melville, about 60 miles southwest of the state capital of Charleston, in Logan County. The two men had been making an effort to escape but were blocked by the intense heat and smoke, according to West Virginia state officials. The two men were identified as Don Bragg and Ellery Hatfield.

Don Bragg, 33, of Accoville in Logan County, is survived by his wife Delores and two children. He had worked in the mines for 15 years. Ellery Hatfield, 47, of Simon in Wyoming Country, is survived by his wife of 10 years, Frida, and their four children. He had 12 years' experience in the mines. Both men started at the Alma No. 1 Mine about five years ago.

The deaths of these two men bring to 15 the number of coal miners killed in three separate incidents during the first three weeks of this year alone. In addition to most recent tragedy, 12 miners were found dead January 4 following an explosion at the Sago Mine near Buckhannon, West Virginia. Another miner died in eastern Kentucky on January 10. By comparison, 22 miners died in US mines in all of 2005.

In the Sago Mine disaster, the trapped men died from carbon monoxide poisoning as their oxygen supply ran out. To date, a thirteenth Sago miner, Randal McCloy, remains in a light coma. Doctors have not yet been able to determine the extent of brain damage he sustained from being trapped in the mine nearly 42 hours before rescuers reached him.

The Kentucky miner, Cornelius Yates, 44, was killed at a Maverick Mining Co. mine in Pikeville, near the Virginia line, when a section of the roof fell in, crushing him to death.

In the latest fatal incident, a fire started Thursday

afternoon 900 feet underground and more than two miles from the entrance of the Alma Mine 1. Nineteen other miners working in the mine at the time were able to escape to the surface.

Rescue teams entered the mine and began searching for the two trapped men. The mine consists of more than 10 miles of catacomb paths cut through the coal. Rescuers reported Friday that they had gone 10,000 feet into the mine, but were prevented from going further due to the thick smoke and heat. Visibility had fallen to no more than 2 or 3 feet and they had to attach themselves together to prevent being lost.

The fire started on the conveyer belt that brings coal out of the mine to the surface. The fire quickly spread to the coal seams, weakening the roof and causing rock fall-ins. Rescuers were blocked from reaching the trapped men by the fire and feared that the weakened roof could collapse and trap even more men. It was not until Saturday afternoon that rescuers were able to reach the men, whose bodies were found together.

The Alma mine is operated by Aracoma Coal, which is owned by Massey Energy, the fourth largest coal company in the country. Miners and residents throughout the mining community had been angered at the refusal of company officials to attend press conferences about the tragedy and explain what was happening.

Frida Hatfield, before learning of her husband's death, told the *Logan Banner* that company officials never contacted her to tell her that her husband was trapped. "I don't really know anything," she said at the time. "Nobody even called me. I heard it from somebody else. I called down to the mine and they said they couldn't give me any information. I called one of my friends and she said, 'Frida, I just didn't know what to say to you, but, yes, Ellery is trapped.' "

As with the Sago disaster, the Alma mine has been allowed to operate despite a horrendous safety record. In the last two years, the mine has received more than 200 citations from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA). The violations include allowing the buildup of coal dust and other combustible materials and poor ventilation. Since June, at least 12 of the violations were related to fire equipment.

A miner from the Alma mine, who asked that his name not be used for fear of being fired, told the *New York Times* that another fire had occurred on the conveyor belt at the mine on December 23. "I work at the belt that caught fire and had to put out a fire at the same exact spot just a couple weeks ago when the sprinkler system didn't work," the miner said, "I reported the fire to my supervisor, and he ignored it."

West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin, along with US Senators Jay Rockefeller and Robert Byrd, all Democrats, have decried the latest tragedy and pledged a full investigation to prevent future accidents. However, even the limited amount of information that has become available since the Alma No. 1 accident indicates that the two deaths could have been prevented, and point to a slackening of mine safety standards by both the Bush and Clinton administrations.

According to MSHA records, conveyor belt fires accounted for 14 percent of all underground mine fires between 1970 and 1990. Flames in such fires traveled for "hundreds of feet" causing "a severe hazard to the health and safety of miners," a 1992 MSHA report stated.

The MSHA estimated at the time that there were 3,000 feet of conveyor belts in a small underground mine and 28,000 feet in large mines. "When belt fires reach the propagation stage, they produce more fire gases and spread faster than the fires of surrounding coal surfaces. The belt fires that have occurred since 1970 have burned as much as 2,000 feet of belt before the fire was extinguished."

To address this problem, in 1992 MSHA officials proposed upgrading testing of conveyor belts and requiring that they be made of materials that are resistant to flames. The regulation was meant to "significantly reduce or eliminate" belt fires.

The proposal was shelved for the eight years of the Clinton administration. In July 2002, under Bush,

MSHA regulators completely abandoned the plan. MSHA officials justified dropping the proposal on the grounds that improvements had been made in carbon monoxide monitoring.

In a briefing last Friday, Bob Friend, acting deputy administrator of the MSHA, commented, "The decision was made that the hazards of belt fires would be addressed through carbon monoxide monitoring systems." At the urging of the mining lobby, the Bush administration has dropped more than a dozen new safety rules, including those that would improve the response of rescue teams.



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