

Survivor of West Virginia mine disaster says respirators failed to work

Jerry White
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In a letter to the families of 12 West Virginia coal miners who were killed in the January 2 explosion at the Sago Mine, the sole survivor of the disaster revealed that several of the emergency breathing apparatuses—or “rescuers”—the workers had been issued failed to operate as the mine filled with deadly gas.

Randall McCloy Jr., who is recovering from severe carbon monoxide poisoning and brain damage, also revealed that three weeks before the blast he and a co-worker discovered a potentially explosive methane gas pocket while drilling a bolt hole in the mine roof. He said they reported the incident to his supervisors and the next day he noticed that the gas leak had “been plugged with glue normally used to secure roof bolts.”

Investigators believe methane gas exploded in an unused area of the mine—possibly ignited by sparks from a collapsing roof—and blasted through a sealed wall to the production area, trapping miners at the coal face behind a deadly wall of smoke and gas.

McCloy begins his letter, “The first thing we did was activate our rescuers, as we had been trained. At least four of the rescuers did not function. I shared my rescuer with Jerry Groves, while Junior Toler, Jesse Jones and Tom Anderson sought help from others. There were not enough rescuers to go around.”

Officials from International Coal Group, which owns the Sago Mine, stated the breathing devices, called self-contained self-rescuers or SCRCs, were approved for use by the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and were in working order. MSHA officials immediately declared that the respirators had been tested and found to be operative.

Not only can such equipment malfunction, particularly if it has not been properly maintained, but there have been repeated incidents in which the failure to properly train miners in the use of these devices has

had fatal consequences. In 1987, a MSHA report on the death of 27 miners in a Utah mine three years earlier found that the miners had not been properly trained in the use of the respirators.

In 2001 the Bush administration quashed a proposed rule change that would have required more training on the use of the respirators and withdrew a proposal requiring mine owners to stock caches of additional respirators that would give miners more time to escape or be rescued. Prior to Bush, the Clinton administration had delayed the implementation of the proposed change.

SCRCs are a 25-year-old technology that only supply one hour’s worth of oxygen. They have long been used by the industry to avoid the cost of additional breathing devices located throughout the mine or building underground refuge stations, as mandated by law in Canada, Australia and other countries, where miners can await rescue with ample supplies of oxygen, food and communication equipment.

With no means to communicate with the emergency personnel thousands of feet above ground, Randall McCloy wrote that the miners used a sledgehammer to hit mine bolts and plates in a desperate effort to convey where they were trapped. Getting no response, the exhausted men gave up their efforts and huddled behind a makeshift curtain. There they wrote messages to their loved ones and McCloy watched each of his comrades overcome by the gas, until he himself passed out. Rescuers did not reach the men for more than 40 hours.

McCloy’s letter was leaked to the press on the eve of a public hearing into the worst mining disaster in West Virginia in nearly 40 years. The May 2-3 hearing will present initial findings from federal and state investigators who have spent the last three months questioning mine officials, safety inspectors and miners

involved in the disaster.

As evidence of criminal negligence by the coal operators and federal and state safety agencies continues to emerge, the death toll in the nation's coal mines continues to rise. On April 21 and 22 two Kentucky miners—Rick McKnight, 45, of Cumberland, and David Chad Bolen, 28, of Harold—were crushed by underground machinery and became the 25th and 26th US coal miners to be killed in 2006.

McCloy's letter confirms the deadly presence of explosive gas in the weeks and days leading up to the explosion, which were ignored by company officials. The *Charleston Gazette* has learned that five days before the explosion company officials found increasing levels of methane in and around a mined-out and sealed area of the mine where the blast is believed to have occurred. According to two Sago Mine officials who testified to investigators, the gas levels were not high enough to be ignited and industry practice is to ignore high concentrations of explosive gases if they are in unused and sealed portions of a mine, also known as "gob" areas.

This area of the Sago Mine had been closed because of repeated roof falls and water leaks. It is cheaper to seal these areas than to continue to perform periodic safety checks and walkthroughs. According to the *Gazette*, investigators are focusing on whether the area was properly sealed off from the production area, and whether mine officials checked for dangerous methane build-up in the unused area, as required by law.

Sago Mine managers received approval last year from West Virginia mine safety officials to seal the area with Omega Blocks—a lightweight, hard-foam alternative to concrete blocks, which mine owners prefer because it can be installed more quickly with fewer workers. The cheaper material has long been criticized for its inability to withstand the pressure of explosions. Moreover, safety inspectors have acknowledged that the contractor who installed the blocks failed to follow an approved plan and used an inexperienced crew to seal the area.

In addition, evidence is emerging that a company "fireboss"—the supervisor in charge of doing pre-production safety checks—ignored danger signs the day of the explosion. Fred Jamieson testified that he found no danger of methane, but that his safety check notebook "disappeared" during the explosion.

Despite the flurry of public promises to improve mine safety by Democratic and Republican politicians after the Sago disaster, nothing of any substance has changed. The mining industry and MSHA continue to block the implementation of existing laws, let alone any additional improvements.

A mine safety bill sponsored by the West Virginia congressional delegation—which would mandate the placement of more oxygen packs in the mines and the construction of safety chambers—has yet to come to a vote in a House of Representatives committee. The committee's chairman, Georgia Republican Charlie Norwood, said last month he was not sure federal legislation was even needed. Now Norwood says he is "leaning toward" drafting legislation by late summer.

Helen Winans, the mother of Marshall Winans, a scoop operator who died in the Sago disaster, commented on the proposed legislation. "It isn't going to work," she told the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*. "You can make all the rules you want to. But if [the inspectors] don't follow through, they're not worth the paper they're written on. Money speaks louder than words, and you ought to know it.... That was my second son that's been killed."

In a moving passage concluding his letter, McCloy told family members, "I cannot explain why I was spared while the others perished. I hope that my words will offer some solace to the miners' families and friends who have endured what no one should ever have to endure."

The sad reality, however, is that such tragedies are inevitable as long as the lives of miners continue to be sacrificed for the profit of the coal bosses, who enjoy the protection of both big business parties.



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