US: Six coal miners trapped underground in Utah

Jerry White
7 August 2007

A powerful cave-in Monday morning trapped six workers in an underground coal mine in central Utah. As of this writing rescuers were still trying to reach the miners, who are believed to be 1,500 feet below ground some four miles from the mine's entrance. As of Monday night—more than 15 hours after the initial mine collapse—searchers had made no contact with the miners.

Rescuers were trying to reach the workers by drilling into the mine vertically from the mountaintop and horizontally from the side, according to Robert E. Murray, chairman of Murray Energy Corporation of Cleveland, Ohio, which is a part-owner of the Crandall Canyon mine. Murray told the Associated Press (AP) if rescuers could open an old mine shaft they believe they can get within 100 feet of where the men are trapped.

"The idea is to get a hole into where they are," Murray said. "They could be in a chamber 1,000 feet long or they could be dead. We just don't know right now." Murray acknowledged that he did not know what kind of breathing equipment the miners were carrying.

The cave-in occurred in the early morning hours Monday at the mine, which is located in a rugged and sparsely populated forest area about 140 miles south of Salt Lake City. Ten men were in the mine at the time and four were able to escape. Seventy-one people are employed at the small mine, with approximately a dozen miners working each shift.

The families of the miners have gathered in the nearby town of Huntington. A local news report said mine rescue teams, including some 200 company employees, have been bringing in maps, heavy mining equipment from around the state and timber to shore up the mine. Utah Governor Jon Huntsman and federal mine inspectors were also at the scene.

University of Utah seismograph stations recorded waves of 3.9 magnitude in the area of the mine early Monday, raising speculation that an earthquake may have caused the cave-in. However, scientists later concluded the collapse at the mine had actually triggered the seismic disturbance, whose epicenter was a mile away. "There is no evidence that the earthquake triggered the mine collapse," Walter Arabasz, director of the seismography stations, told AP.

Disputing the scientific findings, the mine owner angrily insisted, "The whole problem has been caused by an earthquake."

The Crandall Canyon mine has a record of serious safety violations. Government mine inspectors have issued 325 citations against the mine since January 2004, according to the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration's (MSHA) web site. Of those, 116 were what MSHA considered "significant and substantial," meaning they were likely to cause injury or death. Since the beginning of the year, inspectors have issued 32 citations, 14 of them considered significant.

AP reported that last month inspectors cited the mine for violating federal rules requiring that at least two separate passageways be designated for escape in an emergency. This was the third time in less than two years that the mine had been cited for the same problem. In 2005, MSHA ordered the mine's owners to pay $963 for not having escape-ways and in 2006 the fine was reduced to just $60. According to MSHA records, the mine owner has been ordered to pay nearly $152,000 in penalties.

Asked about safety, Murray told reporters, "I believe we run a very safe coal mine. We've had an excellent record."

The state of Utah ranked 12th in coal production in 2006, with 13 underground mines. Emery County, the state's number two coal producer, was also the site of a

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fire that killed 27 miners at the Wilburg mine in December 1984.

So far this year, 10 miners have been killed throughout the coalfields in the US. In 2006, 46 miners were killed, including a dozen miners at the Sago Mine in West Virginia. At the time of the January 2006 tragedy, Democratic and Republican politicians pledged to improve mine safety. Nineteen months later, however, no serious changes have occurred and miners continue to lose their lives and limbs.

To a great extent, the increase in fatalities has been due to the spike in coal production that has been spurred by higher coal prices and the Bush administration's energy policy, which has provided tax incentives and other subsidies to increase output. In order to extract more coal, operators have hired inexperienced miners, reopened long-shut mines and sought to extract coal in more dangerous areas. Meanwhile, the Bush administration, which has staffed the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration with former mine bosses, has lifted safety regulations and done little to enforce the laws presently on the books.

The Murray Energy Corporation is the largest independent, family-held coal producer in the United States, producing about 30 million tons of coal in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Illinois, West Virginia and the company's recent acquisitions in Utah. Known as Ohio's coal king, the two large mines owned by Murray in the state recorded injury rates about one-fourth higher than the national average last year and were cited for nearly 500 safety violations. These included "failing to test for explosive methane gas, accumulations of dangerous coal dust, ventilation problems, unsupported roofs, unsafe equipment and other violations. Inspectors also issued 13 orders instructing miners to clear areas where an "imminent danger" was detected.

Robert Murray is a major donor to the Republican Party, with his coal company's political action committee handing over $200,000 to Republicans during the 2006 elections. He has often testified before Congress on behalf of the National Mining Association in order to press for tax cuts, environmental and safety deregulation, arguing that unreasonable costs were being imposed on operators and were a disincentive to the increase of coal production.

Denouncing MSHA's supposedly high fines and tough regulations, just last month Murray told the Senate's Environment and Public Works Committee: "The fines are outrageous ... and will take a lot of producers down because we can't pass them on to our customers."

According to a news report in the Lexington, Kentucky *Herald-Leader*, in September 2002 Murray used his close relations with Senator Mitch McConnell to chase off MSHA inspectors who were confronting him over safety violations at his mines. The Kentucky Republican senator, just one of many Republican senators who has received large campaign donations from Murray, is married to Labor Secretary Elaine Chao, whose agency oversees mine safety.

The newspaper recounted, "Shouting at a table full of MSHA officials at their district office in Morgantown, W.Va., Murray said, 'Mitch McConnell calls me one of the five finest men in America, and the last I checked, he was sleeping with your boss,' according to notes of the meeting. 'They,' Murray added, pointing at two MSHA men, 'are gone.'" One of the federal safety inspectors was then transferred to another region, away from Murray's mines, the newspaper reported.

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