

Hope dwindling for trapped Utah miners

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Rescuers searching for six trapped coal miners in Utah resumed work Wednesday afternoon after being forced to retreat from the mine because of additional underground cave-ins Tuesday. According to the owner of the Crandall Canyon Mine, the effort to clear a path through the fallen rock and coal to reach the men—believed to be 1,500 feet underground and more than three miles from the mine entrance—would take more than a week.

Three days after the initial mine collapse, there has been no contact with the miners and the situation is increasingly looking grim. It is not known whether the miners lived through the initial cave-in and, if so, whether they have sufficient oxygen to survive. The men were equipped with self-contained self-rescuers that only provide two hours of air.

The co-owner of the mine, Robert Murray, said rescuers were drilling a two-inch hole from on top of the mountain to the area where the miners were working last, in hopes of establishing communication with the miners. Murray acknowledged, however, that the shaft being drilled might miss the underground cavity where the miners are believed to be and hit a solid rock or coal instead. If that were the case, another borehole would have been drilled, taking another three days. Further complicating matters is the fact that the precise location of the miners is not known.

Because there are very few roads in the area, bulldozers are clearing a path so that a seismic listening device can be set up to listen for any sounds from the trapped men. Once the device is in place, crews will set off dynamite, a sign to the stranded men to tap the ceiling with hammers. A federal mine safety official said, however, that the listening device would be pushed to its capacity because of the miners were trapped so deeply underground.

In the meantime, families and friends were gathered in a nearby school in Huntington, 12 miles from the mine, holding a vigil for their loved ones—an all-too-familiar scene in coalfield communities, which have seen the deaths of 57 miners since January 2006. Company officials have refused to disclose the identities of the

workers, but the *Salt Lake Tribune* has confirmed, through family and friends of the miners, that four of the six are Kerry Allred, Luis Hernandez, Carlos Payan and Manuel Sanchez. The victims are described as “family men,” ranging in age from their early 20s to the late 50s, including three Mexican citizens and a miner who had been working there for only a few weeks.

More than 130 miners are working in shifts in the rescue effort, which is in a remote part of central Utah, about 130 miles southeast of Salt Lake City. The rescuers were forced to abandon their work early Tuesday morning when the coal walls, shaken by a movement in the mountain, began collapsing. “We came very close to losing additional miners,” said Laine Adair, general manager of Utah American Energy’s three Utah mines, including Crandall Canyon. Adair told the *Tribune* that the second attempt would be painstaking as rescue miners place 8-inch steel pipes—capable of supporting up to 30 tons of weight each—every 30 inches along the walls of the 14-foot wide tunnel.

The mine’s co-owner Murray continues to claim that the cave-in was caused by an earthquake. Scientists have disputed this claim, saying that seismic activity detected in the area Monday morning was caused by the mine collapse, not the other way around. Rafael Abreu, a geologist with the US Geological Survey National Earthquake Information Center in Colorado, said a 3.9 magnitude event lacked the waveforms characteristic of a naturally occurring earthquake.

Murray’s mining operations, including the Crandall Canyon Mine, have been repeatedly cited for significant safety violations. He has apparently maintained his claim that a “natural disaster” produced the collapse in order to detract attention from the fact the mine was engaged in a dangerous practice called “retreat mining.” Under this method, pillars of coal are used to hold up an area of the mine’s roof. When that area is completely mined, the miners pull the row of pillars down in order to grab the last tons of useful coal, thus causing an intentional roof collapse.

It is “the most dangerous type of mining there is,” Tony Oppegard, a former top federal and state of Kentucky mine safety official who is now a private attorney in Lexington, Kentucky, representing miners, told *USA Today*. According to the American Society of Safety Engineers, retreat mining requires very precise planning and sequencing to ensure roof stability while the pillars supporting the roof are removed. The reason the practice is used is that it pays off: the last bit of coal taken from pillars is pure profit, Oppegard said. Plus, if someone violates rules during pillar removal and there is a collapse, the evidence of rule violations are gone, he said.

Retreat pillar mining is one of the biggest causes of mine roof collapse deaths, according to studies done by the National Institutes of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Three of the nine roof fatalities in 2001 were from retreat mining, according to a 2003 NIOSH paper. Between 1992 and 2001, 100 miners died in roof collapses, 27 of them during retreat mining, the study found.

Yet that type of mining only provides 10 percent of underground coal production, the report said, concluding that “mathematically a coal miner on a pillar recovery section was more than three times as likely to be fatally injured” in a roof collapse than colleagues in other parts of a mine.

“Pillar recovery continues to be one of the most hazardous activities in underground mining,” the report said. A NIOSH study six years earlier found the same thing.

According to *USA Today*, “NIOSH said that during retreat mining nearly half of those fatal accidents happened during the removal of the final pillar, which miners call the ‘suicide pillar,’ said J. Davitt McAteer, former head of the US Mine Safety and Health Administration and now vice president of Wheeling Jesuit University in West Virginia. McAteer wrote a 2001 report for the state of West Virginia calling for tighter restrictions on the retreat mining process, saying one miner told him, ‘We are always pushing the edge of safety; we are right up against it.’ ”

President Bush called Utah Governor Jon Huntsman Wednesday morning to offer the “continued support” from the federal government for the mine rescue effort. This is the height of hypocrisy. The deterioration of safety conditions in the coal mines is the direct product of the Bush administration’s push to deregulate the coal mining industry by staffing the Mine Safety and Health Administration with former mine bosses and drastically

cutting back on inspections, fines and enforcement. In return, Bush and the Republican Party in particular have received huge donations from Big Coal, including Robert Murray, who regularly testifies before Congress on behalf of the National Mining Association to press for further tax cuts and environmental and safety deregulation.

Technology already exists and is in operation in European, Canadian and Australian coal mines that would greatly improve safety in the mines. This includes refuge stations equipped with food, water and long-term oxygen supplies, as well as advanced technology to locate trapped miners. However, the coal operators have fiercely opposed the introduction of any new equipment or mining methods that would undercut their profits, particularly as coal prices, which peaked a year ago, have fallen substantially. Instead, they have hired inexperienced miners, and in the case of Utah an increasing number of low-paid immigrant workers, and sought to extract every last bit of coal, no matter how dangerous the operation.

After the Sago disaster, Democratic and Republican politicians pledged to improve safety in the nation’s mines. Nineteen months later, no serious changes have been implemented.

On Wednesday, the family of Marty Bennett, one of the 12 West Virginia miners killed 19 months ago in the Sago Mine disaster, issued an open letter to the Utah miners’ families expressing their solidarity and sympathy. The letter concluded that the families of the Sago victims along with others “have fought long and hard trying to get laws passed to insure that the mines our loved ones enter are as safe as they can be.”

The bitter truth, however, is that such concerns have been ignored by Democratic and Republican politicians, who continue to allow miners to be sacrificed for the profits of the coal companies.



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