

Workers at Utah mine disaster said owner put “profits before safety”

Samuel Davidson**15 August 2007**

Several coal miners, including at least one of the six men trapped in the Crandall Canyon Mine in Utah, expressed concern about dangers underground before the August 6 cave-in. More than week after the mine collapse no contact has been made with the miners and hope is fading that they will be found alive.

CNN reported that miners previously expressed concern about working in the area of the collapse—called 7 Belt—in the deepest part of the mine. The source, who requested anonymity, said in recent weeks the floors in that part of the mine had been “heaving” or buckling up from intense pressure. He said that supervisors at the mine knew of the problem.

Several miners—reportedly including Manuel Sanchez, who is among the trapped men—were becoming apprehensive, the source said. A member of Sanchez’s family told a Utah newspaper that he had expressed concern about safety in one part of the mine.

Sanchez, 41, has been trapped, along with five other miners—Kerry Allred, 58, Juan Carlos Payan, 22, Brandon Phillips, 24, Jose Luis Hernandez, 23, and Don Erickson, whose age has not been made public. The men have been 1,500 feet underground since the early morning of Monday, August 6, when the mine collapsed. The power of the cave-in was registered as a 3.9 magnitude earthquake by seismologists.

Robert E. Murray, chairman of Murray Energy Corporation of Cleveland, Ohio, who is a part owner of the mine, claimed he was not aware of any safety concerns. “I’ve never heard that,” Murray told a CNN reporter when asked why someone would have been worried about that section of the mine. “I have no idea. It’s probably a rumor, and I’m not going to respond to rumors.”

Paul Riddle, who used to work in one of Murray’s mines, told CNN, “Always profits before safety, that’s my opinion, my feeling, my experience,” he said. He

stated that miners who work for Murray are sometimes forced to push the envelope when it comes to safety, and are afraid to speak up for fear of being fired. “I’m not the only one,” he continued. “There are many, many people that feel this way and are afraid to speak up.”

Murray denied that miners feared reprisals for pointing out safety violations. “If you’re getting that from the community, then those miners must work for another mining company. I don’t operate that way,” he said.

From the beginning of the disaster, Murray has primarily sought to create an alibi to escape any responsibility. He has repeatedly asserted that the cave-in was caused by an earthquake despite scientific evidence showing that the seismic activity detected by geologists was the result of the mine collapse itself.

In a similar manner the owners of the International Coal Group, which operated the Sago, West Virginia mine where 12 coal miners were killed in January 2006, blamed the explosion on a supposed lightning strike. By claiming that the deaths were the product of a “natural disaster” or “an act of God,” the Sago Mine owners sought to cover up their own culpability for the unsafe conditions, including the build up of explosive methane gas.

In the Utah disaster, Murray has continued to claim that a very dangerous procedure known as “retreat mining”, was not being practiced at his mine at the time of the accident. Last week at a press conference Murray repeated his denial, stating that implications that retreat mining had anything to do with the accident were false. “The damage in the mine was totally unrelated to any retreat mining,” he said.

Government records, however, show that retreat mining has been done at the mine since 2005 and that in February of this year, mining officials at the mine told government inspectors that they would be “pulling pillars” for several more years.

Pulling pillars or retreat mining is the most dangerous

form of mining, but also boosts profits. Retreat mining is used after the coal seam has been mined out with a longwall mining machine. Longwall mining leaves large pillars of coal throughout the mine to provide support for the roof. After miners have mined as much coal as they can with the longwall method, some operators resort to retreat mining, where the miners working backwards from the mine face, extract the coal from the support pillars letting the roof collapse as they go.

A study conducted by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health on the effects of retreat mining, shows that miners are three times as likely to be killed from roof falls during retreat mining than during other types of mining. It is “the most dangerous type of mining there is,” Tony Oppegard, a former top federal and state of Kentucky mine safety official, told the *Washington Post*.

Very precise planning and ordering of steps is required during retreat mining to ensure that the roof does not collapse prematurely. However, coal operators continue to use this method of mining because it is extremely profitable. Since the operators have already made most of their investment during the longwall stage of mining, almost all the coal extracted during retreat mining is profit.

Another common danger of retreat mining is that as the pillars are removed, the full weight of the roof is shifted onto the remaining pillars. Often the ground underneath the remaining pillars is not able to support the additional weight causing the ground to break apart and buckle, an effect known as “heaving.”

It now appears that this is what happened in the Crandall Canyon mine. Reports from those involved in the rescue effort show it was not the roof that caved in, but the walls, which fell after the floor rose about two feet. These reports confirm the miners’ reports of heaving taking place several weeks before the disaster.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” a veteran miner who has been working on the rescue effort told the *Salt Lake Tribune*. He explained that the floor rose about two feet, and described the effect on the pillars and floor as being similar to what happens when pressure is applied to the top of a cardboard box. The sides of the box are forced down while the bottom rises.

Rescue workers are seeking to clean away rubble from inside the mine in order to reach the area where the miners are believed to be located. At the same time they are drilling several boreholes to drop down cameras and listening devices. A third attempt at drilling a borehole

began on Monday, after two previous attempts to find the miners failed.

Following the Sago disaster last year, government officials promised that lessons would be learned and measures taken to reduce mining deaths. Several congressional hearings were held and an extensive investigation by the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), and the State of West Virginia was undertaken. This culminated in the passage and signing into law of the MINERS Act by President Bush.

In the end the investigation was a cover-up on behalf of the owners of Sago mine. In addition to repeating the unlikely claim that lightning caused the explosion, the report covered up the fact that MSHA had allowed operations to continue despite hundreds of safety violations.

The MINERS Act has changed nothing for miners. Most of the measures that it included do not take effect for years. In particular, a measure requiring that miners be equipped with communication and tracking devices so they can quickly and accurately be located in the event of a disaster does not take effect for several years. Other proposals such as compelling mine operators to install safety shelters—supplied with extra food, water and oxygen—was rejected by Congress at the coal operators’ insistence, although these refuge stations have saved lives in Canadian, Australian and European mines.

This equipment would have been essential if the Utah miners survived the initial collapse. Communication systems, inside the stations, would have allowed rescuers to determine their exact location in the mine and organize the most efficient means of reaching them. At the same time the shelters would have given the men the means to survive in a cold, dark and noxious environment until rescuers could reach them.



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