

Three rescuers killed at site of Utah mine disaster

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The search for six trapped miners in Utah was halted indefinitely after a cave-in at the Crandall Canyon Mine Thursday night caused the deaths of three workers involved in the rescue effort. Two of the men—Brandon Kimber and Dale Black—were Crandall Canyon miners searching for their missing comrades, while the third, Gary Jensen, was an employee of the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA).

Six other rescue workers, including another MSHA employee, were injured in the mine collapse, which occurred some 2,000 feet below the surface. Three of the injured men were treated and released from various hospitals Friday, while three others were recovering from non-life-threatening injuries at hospitals in Price, Provo and Salt Lake City, Utah.

The catastrophe occurred on the tenth day since the initial collapse of the mine, and the ninth day since rescuers began tunneling through fallen rock and coal to make a horizontal path to the last known location of the six miners. The rescue effort has been continuously stalled by intense seismic activity in the mine, called “bumps” and “bounces” by miners, as the crushing weight of the mountain above caused the walls of the mine tunnel to give way. A similar incident caused the initial disaster.

Earlier in the week as many as a dozen workers asked to be moved to a different part of the rescue operation because they were afraid for their safety.

The mine, co-owned by Ohio-based Murray Energy Corporation, has been unstable for months. Last March, production was abandoned in a northern section of the mine after a similar bounce caused devastating damage. In the weeks before the August 6 collapse, miners working in the southern tunnels—including at least one who is among the missing—expressed concerns the floors in that part of the mine had been “heaving” or

buckling up from intense pressure. Supervisors knew of the problem.

University of Utah Seismograph Stations in Salt Lake City confirmed Friday that the latest cave-in had registered on their sensors as a 1.6 magnitude event at 6:39 pm Thursday, according to the *Salt Lake Tribune*. University spokesman Lee Siegel told the newspaper that seismologists characterize the reading as “very, very shallow,” about one-tenth of a mile beneath the surface.

Citing Siegel, the *Salt Lake Tribune* noted, “The nature of the seismic waves measured from the event provide strong indications that it was a ‘mining-induced settling of the mountain’ that follows the original 3.9-magnitude cave-in on Aug. 6.”

The newspaper continued, “It seems like this mountain is settling or collapsing in slow motion,” Siegel said, noting that since the initial event nearly two weeks ago there have been 19 seismic spikes, or ‘bumps’ at Crandall Canyon, seven of them this week—two on Thursday, one Wednesday, two on Tuesday and two on Monday.”

It appears likely that the latest deaths are only a continuation of the same structural instabilities that produced the initial collapse. Company CEO Robert Murray, who has sought to deflect criticism from his company by making frequent appearances before the television cameras throughout the tragedy, was completely absent on Friday.

Although Murray originally denied it, mine operators were engaged in a dangerous practice called “retreat mining,” in which coal pillars holding up the mine roof are removed or reduced in size in order to extract the last amounts of coal before a mine is abandoned. Utah’s mines are tunneled particularly deep—to 1,800 to 2,000 feet below the surface—in order to reach wide

seams of profitable coal. This means a massive amount of weight is being sustained by pillars of coal, which mining engineers believe reaches its load capacity at around 1,500 feet.

Despite these dangers, MSHA officials approved the company's mining plan, a point that Murray repeatedly cited in order to justify his actions. At the same time, Murray has insisted that an earthquake caused the cave-in—and that the bounces that followed were “aftershocks”—not the shifting of the mountain due to the miles of tunnels, which have undermined its foundation. Utah scientists have disputed this claim and presented evidence that the mine collapse triggered the seismic activity, not the other way around.

In his comments after the death of the three rescue workers Republican Senator from Utah, Orrin Hatch, repeated Murray's false claims, referring to the mine implosions as a “natural disaster.” “How do you tell when a mountain is going to shift?” Orrin asked, adding, “We haven't had that many in the past.”

The instability of the mine and the numerous warning signs raises the question of whether mining should have been conducted at Crandall Canyon at all. But the increased demand for coal during the last few years and rising profits has driven energy companies to dig deeper and deeper and carry out riskier efforts to extract as much coal as possible. Seven of Utah's 10 coalmines operate below the 1,500-foot level, and an eighth one will pass that depth soon.

At the same time it is clear that MSHA, far from enforcing safety regulations, has been complicit in the cover up of deadly conditions at the mine. Under the Bush administration, the federal mine safety agency has been handed over to former coal bosses, like MSHA head Richard Stickler, who was a long-term proponent of the self-regulation of the industry.

Robert Murray is a major donor to the Republican Party with close connections to Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell, the husband of US Labor Secretary Elaine Chao, who oversees MSHA's operations.

The deaths of these three rescue workers brings the total of fatalities in the mines to over 60 since January 2006, when 12 West Virginia miners died at the Sago Mine. Despite the well-publicized expressions of concern, and the promises of safety improvements made by Democratic and Republican politicians—claims that are once again being made in the light of this latest

disaster—the catastrophe at Crandall Canyon Mine has made it clear that there have been no fundamental changes. The lives and limbs of miners continue to be sacrificed for the profits of the coal companies.



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