

Report shows US coal mines not properly inspected due to cutbacks, mismanagement at safety agency

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A government investigation of the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) concluded that cuts in personal, inadequate funding and other problems have led to the failure of the agency to conduct required inspections at 107—or 15 percent—of the nation’s 731 underground coal mines last year. MSHA is mandated to inspect every active coal mine, at least once every quarter of the year.

The report, released by the Department of Labor, Office of the Inspector General, also found that many inspections—even if they were carried out—were inadequate 15 percent of the time. Where MSHA listed inspections as being complete, they were often incomplete or had been stopped before completion.

MSHA management did not place enough emphasis on the completion or proper documentation of inspections, the report said, and officials failed to document “critical inspection activities” such as checking for coal dust, verifying enough roof supports and ventilation, or checking high-voltage lines.

The inspector general found that MSHA officials falsified data on their public web site to give the impression that the agency was carrying out a greater number of inspections than it actually was.

The auditors took a detailed look at the seven inspections completed in 2006 and 2007 at the Crandall Canyon Mine in Utah where six miners were trapped and killed this past August when the roof collapsed. Three rescuers were also killed in the attempt to reach the trapped men.

The auditors found that three of the seven inspections were faulty. The first was labeled incomplete and unsatisfactory by the MSHA supervisor, but the inspection was not redone. Another lacked adequate

documentation. A third, which included five major inspection activities, was misdated suggesting the possibility that the mine’s roof-control plan was not re-examined in the weeks before the tragic mine collapse—even after an earlier cave-in signaled the danger that the weight of the mountain above the mine was too much for the structure to handle.

Most glaring in the report was the status of safety inspections in West Virginia. During 2006, 125 inspections were not completed at 85 of the state’s 165 underground mines. During that year, 23 miners were killed in West Virginia, including 12 miners at the Sago Mine in January 2006. That was the greatest number of West Virginia miners in more than 12 years.

Despite these failings, the inspector general has no authority to mandate MSHA to change its procedures. In his response to the seven recommendations contained in the report, MSHA head Richard Stickler stated the agency would adopt five of them, but only gave a detailed timeline for completing one.

The two proposals Stickler refused to adopt would require federal inspectors to document all critical inspection activities and to obtain a certification from field office supervisors that all inspections are thorough and complete.

In the immediate aftermath of the Sago disaster and for several months afterwards, President Bush, various congressman and West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin promised steps would be taken to ensure such tragedies would not be repeated. The inspector general’s report shows these promises were nothing but empty words.

Overall, 47 miners were killed in 2006, the highest number of mining deaths in 14 years. So far this year, 29 coal miners and another 30 miners of other metals

and minerals have been killed.

The lack of inspections has been most dramatic at smaller mines. On average, only 75 miners worked at the 107 mines where inspections were missed. In the past few years, the rise in coal prices and the pro-business policies of the Bush administration have produced a growth in production. Smaller, less-profitable mines, which had been closed, have been reopened. Miners who were laid off for years were called back to work, and thousands of younger, inexperienced miners were sent below ground, with little training. Miners who voiced safety concerns were fired.

Many relatives of the killed miners at the Crandall Canyon Mine testified that their husbands or fathers had told them the mine was unsafe, but they were afraid to voice their concerns for fear of being fired and blacklisted.

Underground coal miners have known for years that MSHA, even when it does find violations, does little to enforce safety standards and at best gives the coal operators a slap on the wrist. Millions of dollars in fines go uncollected. At Sago and the Aracoma Alma mine, also in West Virginia—where two miners were killed last year—as well as the Darby mine in Kentucky where five miners were killed, MSHA officials found hundreds of safety violations before the accidents, yet the mines were allowed to operate and the mine owners were given only small fines.

Inspections are supposed to take place over several days and during each shift. Among other things, inspectors are to take air and dust samples and ensure that ventilation and roof support are in place and working. They are also to verify that there are proper escape paths for miners and that machinery, beltways and power systems are working correctly. The inspectors are also supposed to certify that mine maps are up to date and that the mine is operating safely.

Even this limited role has been drastically reduced during the two terms of the Bush administration. The cuts in funding for MSHA have meant that the number of inspectors has fallen from 605 to 496 between 2002 and 2006, while the number of underground mines increased by 9 percent during the period. At the same time, former coal executives have been placed in charge of MSHA.

MSHA has yet to issue its report on the Crandall

Canyon Mine disaster. Its investigation is being conducted in secret, with news organizations, family members and the public excluded from the proceedings.



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