

Idaho silver miner missing after cave-in

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A miner remains missing after a cave-in more than a mile underground in a northern Idaho silver mine Friday evening. The miner, 53-year-old Larry Marek, was extracting silver from a vein in the Lucky Friday Mine owned by Hecla Mining Company when a large section of the tunnel collapsed. Marek is a long-time employee at the Lucky Friday Mine, and a miner for 30 years.

Rescuers on the surface have had no contact with Marek and his condition is unknown. Working around the clock in 10-person crews, rescuers had cleared away some 37 feet of debris, about half of the estimated 75-foot by 20-foot-wide blockage in the tunnel, as of Monday afternoon.

The company has not released details on what caused the collapse, which it called a “localized fall of ground.” Hecla has stated that at the time of the accident, Marek and another miner—identified by Marek’s relatives as his brother—had been watering down blasted out rock when the tunnel caved in approximately 75 feet from the end of the 6,150-foot deep corridor. Marek’s co-worker escaped the collapse.

Officials have said Marek may be trapped on the other side of the debris, but it is not clear yet if the entire 75-foot section fell. On Sunday, Hecla delivered a remote-controlled excavator to the mine surface, where it was taken apart, transported down to the site of the cave-in, and reassembled for use.

The mine is located just east of the town of Mullan, near the Idaho-Montana border. The area, called the Coeur d’Alene Mining District, is one of the largest producers in the world of silver, zinc and lead.

Mullan has a population of only 840, with most families involved in silver mining. Some 275 union miners, organized in the United Steelworkers, are employed at the mine, along with 100 contractors. The USW has not issued a statement on the accident.

With the rise in metal prices over the past few years,

extraction rates have increased in remote and very old mines. The Lucky Friday Mine is among many operations in the area dating back to at least the Gold Rush era of the 19th century. Hecla is the oldest silver company in North America and the largest in the US.

According to the company’s web site, the Lucky Friday operation processes ore at an average rate of approximately 950 tons per day. In 2010, the mine produced 3.4 million ounces of silver. Because of the massive scale of its productions, Hecla is the lowest-cost primary silver producer in the country. The company boasts that in 2010 it delivered “10.6 million ounces of silver at an average total cash cost per ounce of *negative* \$1.46.”

The same day as the accident, Hecla announced it was expanding operations in the mine, planning to sink shafts down to 8,000 feet to vastly increase its output. The expansion is the latest in a series for the company, which since 2008 has added an additional shaft and a high-speed processing plant on site. Hecla issued a statement October 25, 2010 stating that an expansion of its Number 4 shaft in the Lucky Friday Mine “could increase the mine’s annual silver production by approximately 50 percent from current levels and extend the mine life beyond 2030.”

The intensifying drive for productive capacity underlies rising rates of mining accidents over the past several years, in the US and internationally. Over the past year, 78 coal, metal and mineral miners have been killed on the job in the US.

Silver prices hit their highest level in more than three decades on Friday after a crush of speculation in precious metals. Miguel Perez-Santalla, vice president of sales at Heraeus Precious Metals Management, explained to Reuters, “People are buying gold and silver as a protection against inflation. If the Fed doesn’t start raising rates, inflation is really going to hit hard and cripple the economy.” Silver ended trading at

\$42.68 per ounce.

The Lucky Friday mine was last inspected by the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration on March 3. At that time, MSHA issued eight citations against the mine, including a significant and substantial violation for scaling and support, which mandates that warnings of hazardous conditions be made known to workers before they are given entry to a dangerous area. Another serious citation was issued over inadequate rails and guards around travelways where materials or workers could fall.

On March 4, one day after inspections, a large section of roof was reported to have collapsed. A summary of the incident in MSHA's database by an employee at the mine makes clear that the fall could easily have been fatal. "We were on an intersection trying to relieve some bags in the wire and re-bolt when a 10' long x 8' wide x 6' high section of the back came down. We were in the process of relieving the area at the time," a miner noted.

Ten other rock falls are listed in MSHA's records for the past year at the mine, including two that resulted in injuries.

Last year, a silver miner was killed by a rock fall at the Galena Mine, located about 8 miles from the Lucky Friday operation.



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