

Body of Idaho silver miner recovered

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On April 25, rescuers located the body of an Idaho silver miner killed in a cave-in 10 days earlier. Hecla Mining Company, operator of the Lucky Friday Mine, said late Saturday that the rescue efforts for 53-year-old Larry “Pete” Marek were to be shifted to a recovery operation.

On Sunday morning, Hecla announced that the miner was presumed dead. His body was recovered shortly thereafter. Officials have not announced what may have caused the collapse.

A miner with 30 years’ experience and 12 years of employment at the Lucky Friday Mine, Marek was remembered by friends as hard working and kind, a lover of fishing and hunting, and a private family man. He was a third-generation miner, relatives said.

At the time of the accident, Marek and his brother, Mike, were wetting down freshly blasted rock and ore in the end of a tunnel 6,150 feet underground. A massive section of the corridor collapsed in the area where Larry Marek had been working.

Working under the assumption that the miner may have been trapped in a gap at the back of the tunnel, rescuers dug away at the debris in 12-hour shifts using a remote-controlled excavator. Dangerous conditions and increasingly difficult obstacles slowed the digging through last week.

On April 19, rescuers snaked a camera into a borehole and detected open space in the debris. They began pumping in fresh air and water in the event that Marek was trapped inside. After more probing, however, rescuers discovered that the collapse was far more extensive than initially estimated. By April 24, crews had advanced 184 feet into a 220-foot tunnel, where they bored more holes through the remaining rubble. There they found only sand and other debris.

The Lucky Friday is one of several large metal mines surrounding the tiny town of Mullan, population 840, in the Idaho panhandle along the Montana border. The

region, known as the Coeur d’Alene Mining District, is one of the largest producers in the world of silver, zinc and lead, and economic life centers around the mines. The Lucky Friday Mine employs some 375 miners, and is among the oldest silver mines in the country.

Surging commodities prices underlie an expansion of production and the consequent increase in mining accidents over the past few years. Silver prices are currently at the highest level in more than three decades, up by more than 150 percent over the year and up by 50 percent from prices at the end of 2010.

The same day as the roof fall, Hecla announced it was expanding silver extraction to a depth of 8,000 feet in the mine, which was projected to increase output by 50 percent. The Lucky Friday operation is already extremely profitable, processing ore on site at an average rate of 950 tons per day. Last year, the mine produced 3.4 million ounces of silver.

Since 2008, Hecla has added an additional shaft at the Lucky Friday Mine and a high-speed processing facility at the surface to maximize profits.

Safety infrastructure, however, has gone without such upgrades. Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) records indicate that in the past year, the mine saw 11 other rock falls, including one on March 4 due to inadequate scaling and support for the tunnel walls (see “Idaho silver miner missing after cave-in”).

An April 21 report by Oregon Public Broadcasting noted that communications technology at the Lucky Friday Mine is four decades old. The mine has only a series of landline telephones installed underground and phones that are used as pagers. Hecla said no phones were located within 150 feet of the site of the collapse.

At the time of the April 15 cave-in, Marek had no communications device on his person with which to contact rescuers on the surface, and no provisions aside from his lunch and a bottle of water.

Mike Summercamp, an electrician at the nearby

Galena silver mine, told Oregon Public Broadcasting that in the event of a roof fall, trapped miners would have to resort to “pounding on piping, or even shouting.”

MSHA shares responsibility in neglect of basic safety protocol in non-coal mines. Although MSHA requires two-way communications devices for underground coal mines—a component of the 2006 MINER Act passed in the wake of the Sago mine disaster—the regulatory agency requires no such safeguard in metal and mineral mines.

The MINER Act also mandates that MSHA provide updates to the public regarding mining accidents. The agency did not do so for the Lucky Friday accident, compelling the public to instead rely only on statements issued by Hecla. As of April 25, MSHA had posted no details on the collapse.

Over the past year, 80 miners have been killed on the job in the United States, including an Ohio man who was buried in a roof fall at the Subtropolis underground limestone mine April 25.



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