

West Virginia coal miner killed

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A West Virginia coal miner was killed early Monday morning after being crushed when a wall collapsed on him. Joseph M. Cassell is the seventh coal miner killed in the US this year and the third in West Virginia.

According to the State Office of Miners' Health Safety and Training, Cassell was killed at the Rhino Eastern's Eagle No. 1 mine near Bolt, West Virginia while "cleaning/shoveling along the rib to set timbers." Shortly after 1:00 a.m., a 32-foot-long, 100-inch-high, 37-inch-thick piece of wall fell on him. Cassell, 33 years old, was a resident of the small town of Glen Daniel just west of Beckley in Raleigh County.

The mine has an extensive record of violations. Federal inspectors have issued 128 citations to the Eagle No. 1 mine since January, including 70 for violations cited in the first three weeks of June. Of those, 30 were designated as "significant and substantial" (S&S) violations. Violations are classified as S&S if they are so hazardous as to pose imminent risk of death to miners and warrant the immediate halting of operations.

Federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) inspectors also issued an S&S citation less than a week before the accident for failing to have in place an adequate "roof control plan." By the federal agency's criteria, operator Rhino Resource Partners had a "pattern of violations" for S&S citations, with 70 issued during the course of 575 inspection hours over the past year. This rate is more than double the national average.

As operated, it was clear that it was only a matter of time that such a fatality would occur. According to MSHA there have been at least seven injuries in the mine since June of last year, including three involving roof or wall collapses similar to the one that killed Cassell.

The Eagle No. 1 mine is one of many smaller underground operations in the region out of which giant

corporations extract billions of dollars in coal every year. Rhino operates several major complexes in the coalfields of central Appalachia, including five underground mines, three surface mines, and several processing facilities. As of last year, the company controlled some 102 million tons of proven coal reserves and over 29 million tons of other coal deposits through joint ventures. The company has expanded through buyouts and acquisitions in the coalfields, absorbing smaller firms and unmined reserves throughout the region. On June 14, Rhino announced it had purchased 32,600 acres of metallurgical grade coal seams and surface rights in Randolph County and nearby Upshur County for \$7.5 million.

Halfway through 2011, thirteen US miners have died, seven in the coal industry and the remainder in metal and nonmetal mines. The drop in mining fatalities since last year is only due to the devastating death toll in 2010, when 48 coal miners were killed, including 35 in West Virginia. 2010 was the deadliest year for coal miners in nearly two decades. (See "Forty-eight US miners killed in 2010 — most since 1992")

The year also saw the worst mining disaster in 40 years when an explosion at Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch mine took the lives of 29 miners. The investigation into the UBB disaster released in May found that the explosion was "a completely predictable result for a company that ignored basic safety standards." Investigators concluded that Massey Energy "operated its mines in a profoundly reckless manner, and 29 coal miners paid with their lives for the corporate risk-taking."

Despite attempts by investigators to paint Massey Energy as a "bad apple" in an otherwise healthy industry, the recklessness and "corporate risk-taking" are ubiquitous in the coal business, and state and federal regulators allow these deadly conditions to persist. A review of the MSHA investigations into

recent fatal accidents reveals the extremely hazardous conditions in which miners work every day.

This year was off to a bloody start with the death of 19-year-old John C. Lester Jr. on January 27 at Baylor Mining's Jims Branch No. 3a Mine in Wyoming County, West Virginia. Lester was a "red hat" with only 15 weeks on the job. This required him to be under direct supervision at all times. After entering the mine on his own with no work directions Lester was left alone, without required radio communication, for hours before the accident.

In its preliminary report, MSHA officials claimed Lester "received fatal injuries when he became caught between the moving No. 3 conveyor belt and the metal dip pan over the No. 3 conveyor belt that connected to the No. 4 conveyor belt discharge head roller." Trapped in this V-shaped area, Lester died of asphyxiation as coal continued to be moved by the belts. (See "West Virginia teen is first US coal mining fatality of 2011")

Earlier this month on June 6, a 71-year-old contract coal truck driver was killed when the coal truck he was driving ran up on a roadway berm and overturned. Preliminary findings into the accident claim Lacy E. Trent's loaded coal truck "was traveling down a steep grade (18 percent) at a high rate of speed." Trent was cut from his truck's cab by rescuers and taken to Lonesome Pine Hospital where he subsequently died from his injuries. The accident occurred at Humphreys Enterprises Inc.'s No. 5 Strip Mine in Wise County, Virginia.

On June 9, just three days after Trent's death, 54-year-old ironworker Fred A. Benally died after he fell eight feet from a 12-inch-wide steel beam. During the fall he struck a cross beam with his chest flipping over the beam onto his back. Benally lost consciousness in route to the hospital and died. The ironworker had 12 years experience but had been at Arch Coal's West Elk Mine in Colorado for only a month prior to the accident.



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