

Two more US coal miners die on the job

Clement Daly
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A West Virginia miner was fatally electrocuted last week, bringing to 11 the number of coal mining deaths in 2011. Forty-year-old Jason Stacey was killed shortly after 8 p.m. on July 27 while welding pipes at the Superior Cleaning Plant, a coal preparation plant at Maitland in the southern county of McDowell.

According to a preliminary report from the US Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), Stacey was welding pipes in a confined area near the ceiling of the filter room of the preparation plant. The area in which Stacey was working was wet. When he came into contact with the welding electrode, he was fatally shocked. The plant was undergoing renovation at the time and was not processing coal.

Stacey had been working at the plant for 15 months and had 12 years experience as a foreman. He was employed at Mike Dover Corporation, a small independent contractor based out of Marion, Illinois. Stacey is the fourth miner killed in West Virginia this year.

The plant, which is owned by Superior Processing, Inc., has been ordered closed while an investigation is conducted. Superior Processing is one of several small companies controlled by Edward A. Asbury out of Bluefield, Virginia.

The overwhelming majority of US coal mining deaths each year occur in the Appalachian coalfields, most involving independent or small subsidiary-operated sites that are rife with safety hazards. Virtually all coal mining and processing sites in the region are nonunionized, and most are inspected infrequently. Federal inspectors had visited the Superior Processing plant only once in 2011 prior to the accident, according to MSHA records.

Only hours before Stacey's death, MSHA had issued a mid-year review hailing the eight coal mining deaths and six non-metal mining deaths through June 30 as an "all-time low." The review did not include the three

miners who have died on the job since then.

On July 11, Ryan K. Thatcher was crushed to death in an eastern Kentucky mine. (See "Another Kentucky coal miner killed") Ten days later, on July 21, 37-year-old Jeri L. Etsitty was killed at the Navajo surface coal mine in Fruitland, New Mexico, when she was struck from behind by a truck on a mine access road. Etsitty, who had more than four years' experience, was pronounced dead at the scene shortly after 9 p.m.

The Navajo mine is run by the BHP Navajo Coal Company, an affiliate of energy giant BHP Billiton, the world's largest mining company by revenue. With an annual output of up to 9 tons of coal, the Navajo mine feeds the Four Corners Power Plant in New Mexico. Earlier this year Australian-based BHP Billiton knocked Microsoft out of the third-biggest listed company position and is expected to rake in \$22 billion in profit this year. (See "Australia: Mining giants post record profits, on top of tax victory")

The number of fatalities detailed in the MSHA report is substantially lower than the 41 deaths in the first six months of last year. Twenty-nine of those deaths were from last April's explosion at Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch mine—the worst coal mining disaster in 40 years.

MSHA chief Joe Main sought to balance his enthusiasm over the data with the obligatory comment that "one mining death is still one too many."

However, Main offered no explanation why dozens of miners continue to die in the US every year when such deaths are preventable. In fact, MSHA plays a vital role in ensuring that mine operators escape legal responsibility for workplace accidents and deaths. Fifteen months after the Upper Big Branch disaster, not one executive from Massey has been held accountable despite ample evidence of illegal activity and the company's flagrant disregard for safety.

International demand for rich Appalachian

bituminous and metallurgical coal continues to rise, fueled by a weak dollar and industrial expansion in Asia. This has driven an expansion and reopening of mining operations in the coalfields region at the same time that governmental regulatory agencies have seen their budgets stagnate or decline and their enforcement powers weakened.

This state of affairs makes accidents all but inevitable. On Saturday, a train derailment at the Tunnel Ridge Mine in Triadelphia, West Virginia sent six coal miners to the hospital. Tulsa-based Alliance Resource Partners, which owns the mine, has been engaged in underground coal production since last March.

In the month of June alone, federal inspectors issued more than 150 citations at 12 coal mines. The visits were part of MSHA's so-called "impact inspections" of sites with poor safety records. Inspectors cited the mines for 61 significant and substantial violations, a designation for hazards posing imminent risk of death to miners. Five mines were ordered immediately closed upon inspection.

Although these and scores of other mines have been cited repeatedly for life-threatening conditions, MSHA did not ascribe to any of the operations the "pattern of violations" designation, which would give federal inspectors the power to halt coal production at sites until safety problems are corrected.



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