

Two Kentucky miners killed in wall collapse

Naomi Spencer
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Two miners were killed and two others were injured in a wall collapse at a western Kentucky surface mine early Friday morning. So far this year, 19 coal miners have died on the job in the US, most in the states of Kentucky and neighboring West Virginia. Four miners have been killed in a string of accidents in the past month.

Samuel Lindsey and Darrel Winstead were driving a truck near a highwall at the Equality Boot surface mine near Centertown, Kentucky, when a huge slab of the rock face suddenly collapsed on them. The accident occurred around 6:30 a.m.

Lindsey, 23, of Mortons Gap, and Winstead, 47, of Madisonville, were initially reported trapped under the rubble. When their bodies were recovered at 1:15 p.m. the Ohio County coroner said it appeared the men were killed instantly in the collapse. The two were blasters who worked as contractors for Mine Equipment and Mill Supply Company. At least two other miners were hospitalized after the accident.

“A portion of the highwall failed in the west end of the #11 pit covering the truck and the two miners,” the preliminary report from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) states. Local officials said the men may have backed into the wall before it collapsed. Few other details have been reported as of this writing. The mine remains closed while MSHA and the state Office of Mine Safety investigates the accident.

Equality Boot is Armstrong Coal’s newest active mine. Since beginning operations in September 2010, the company has extracted nearly 2 million tons of coal. The operation employs a “truck-and-shovel” mining method, whereby coal is blasted out of an open pit to be collected by workers operating large excavators and dump trucks, then transported directly to barges on the Green River by conveyor belts. According to the company’s web site, the system

yields 2,500 tons of coal per hour.

Since opening, the mine has been cited 15 times for safety violations by MSHA, including several for inadequate maintenance of highwalls and equipment. In April, Equality Boot was cited for an incident involving highwall stability. The company insists the October 28 accident is unrelated to earlier citations.

Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear issued a perfunctory statement offering his condolences. “Mine safety is of paramount importance, and investigative teams will begin work immediately to determine the cause of this accident and whether there are any steps that can be taken to ensure such an accident does not occur again.”

Beshear, a Democrat who is running for re-election, has overseen a significant expansion of surface mining across the state and sought to protect coal operators from regulatory oversight.

On October 17, the Beshear administration joined with the Kentucky Coal Association in a lawsuit against the Environmental Protection Agency to prevent it from blocking surface mine projects. The federal agency has denied permits for 75 sites in eastern Kentucky over the dangers they would pose to water quality and public health. In a news release, Beshear called the EPA’s decisions “arbitrary and unreasonable.” Last month, West Virginia filed a similar lawsuit.

The governor has also appointed coal executives to the Kentucky Mining Board, including an official from Alliance Resource Partners, the owner of the Dotiki Mine where two miners were crushed last year in a roof collapse. The board is in charge of reviewing safety standards and approving all regulations on mining.

At the federal level, the Obama administration is pursuing deregulation through dismantling and under funding regulatory agencies. On October 26, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar announced that the

administration would merge the Office of Surface Mining (OSM), which enforces federal and state regulations on surface mine operations across the country, with the Bureau of Land Management, the agency responsible primarily for managing public land in the West.

The change will de-emphasize already poor oversight of mountaintop removal sites and hydrofracking operations in Appalachia and Pennsylvania. The OSM has been subjected to a funding cut of more than 10 percent effective October 1, bringing its budget for regulating active mines to under \$120 million.

Since the Upper Big Branch Mine disaster in April 2010, MSHA has conducted a series of “impact inspections” across the country, including 73 in Kentucky. These unannounced inspections have found 2,000 violations and prompted 427 mine closure orders because of imminent danger. Despite rampant hazards, MSHA has issued only four mines “potential pattern of violations” notices that could result in suspending production at the mine.

In the midst of this supposed crackdown, the mining industry has feverishly pursued mergers and acquisitions, reopening dangerous old shafts and ramping up production schedules. In an October 21 interview with the Associated Press, MSHA director Joe Main—the former safety director of the United Mine Workers union—noted that between April 2010 and June 2011, the industry saw an 8 percent increase in the number of new mining units, either in the form of expansions of existing mines or the initiation of new operations. “We’ve applied tools that are effective on safety,” he claimed, “but also don’t deter growth.”



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