

Harlan, Kentucky coal miner killed in roof fall

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29 September 2012

A roof collapse in a Tennessee mine early Wednesday claimed the life of a Harlan County, Kentucky miner. Jeremy Perkins was crushed under tons of rock more than a mile underground at the northeast Tennessee Double Mountain Mine.

Perkins, 32, of the Harlan community of Wallins Creek, had been working as a miner since the age of 18. He leaves two children and three stepchildren.

His death brings to 16 the number of coal miners killed on the job this year in the US, compared to 13 by this time in 2011. The accident is the third fatal roof fall of the year. In all, 30 miners across the coal, metal and non-metal mining industries in the US have been killed since January.

Perkins worked as a section foreman and was manning a continuous mining machine at the time of the accident. According to a preliminary report on the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) web site, he was at the back of a mine shaft preparing the roof, little more than 5 feet from the floor, for the installation of a belt conveyor drive. At approximately 5:40 a.m., “The victim stepped approximately 8 feet in by the last row of permanent roof support, apparently to view the roof line that he had established.”

Witnesses said Perkins asked a co-worker to hold a cable, when, according to the report filed with MSHA, “A section of the unsupported roof approximately 6½ feet long by 6 feet wide by up to 8 inches thick fell, striking the victim and pinning him to the mine floor.”

Other miners on the crew quickly “set wooden timbers to support the area up to the victim” and lifted the rock with a jack. Perkins was pulled from under the rock, “placed on a backboard stretcher and transported to the surface via rubber tired buggy and rail mantrip.”

Jeff Hentschel of the Tennessee Occupational Safety

and Health Agency told the *Knoxville News Sentinel* that although his agency was notified of the accident, “It wasn’t necessary to send our mine rescue team because the company felt it could extract the miner.”

The Double Mountain Mine, located some 75 miles north of Knoxville, is situated in a remote area off of Highway 90. Local emergency responders drove for nearly an hour on winding mountain roads to reach the mine entrance. Perkins was transported by ambulance to the Claiborne County Hospital emergency room, where he was pronounced dead.

Claiborne County Sheriff’s detective Bobby Morelock told the *Harlan Daily Enterprise* that Perkins was dead at the site of the collapse. One day after the accident, the Sheriff’s office stressed that Kopper Glo, the mine operator, would direct the investigation into Perkins’s death. “We went ahead and sent him for an autopsy to learn of the injuries,” Morelock told the paper, stressing that Kopper Glo followed “very strict guidelines.” “We should be wrapping this up today,” he added. “There’s no signs of any type of criminal activity whatsoever. I’m sure the mining company is going to finish their investigation.”

A reporter from the *News Sentinel* noted that on Thursday, “Only a handful of workers and journalists from Tennessee and Kentucky media outlets were at the front office during the morning. None of the workers agreed to speak about the accident, and no officials were available to talk, they said.”

Kopper Glo acquired the Double Mountain mine in 2009, along with two large surface mines in the area. The company has operated a processing facility and rail load-out facility for more than half a century. Kopper Glo is a lessee of private equity firm Quintana Energy Partners, a spin-off of Natural Resource Partners.

The company owns more than 2 billion tons of coal

reserves, the extraction of which it subcontracts to some 270 operators such as Kopper Glo. This arrangement obscures the tremendous profit-making by global energy giants and market speculators in rural regions of the US often depicted as more removed from the national and world economy. The relationship of the owners and operators also masks the underlying causes and responsibility for poor workplace conditions and employee deaths.

According to the company's web site, Quintana has fitted out Kopper Glo with "a modern preparation plant that is rated at 300 tons per hour, 1.5 million raw tons per year." Automated conveyor systems and computerized scales ensure seamless loading and export of the low-sulfur bituminous coal.

"In addition to the current mines," the company states, "there are also plans for the development of additional deep mines. Kopper Glo's leased property has a large reserve base of recoverable coal for long-term operations." Beyond the natural resources, Quintana and other international firms enjoy loose regulatory oversight and a desperate economic climate in the region. Like virtually all Appalachian mines, the Double Mountain mine is non-unionized. The workforce is drawn from distressed communities like Wallins Creek, where one in three residents lives in poverty and per capita income is just over \$8,000 per year.

Quintana's chief executive, Corbin J. Robertson, Jr., is one of the industry's wealthiest executives, owning more than \$213 million in stock and company options.

In the past two years, the MSHA database lists at least 10 incidents at Double Mountain in which miners sustained injuries, including from falling rocks. The last routine health and safety inspection overseen by MSHA just three weeks ago resulted in 24 citations, including 4 for significant and substantial (S&S) violations. This designation, reserved for hazards that pose imminent danger, was applied to two instances of inadequate "protection from falls of roof, face and ribs," the lack of an adequate roof control plan, and an inadequate ventilation plan. Although Kopper Glo was issued citations carrying minimal fines, operations continued uninterrupted at the mine.

The hazardous conditions are replicated in pit mines throughout the country, creating a steady stream of accidents and deaths. On September 13, 61-year-old

William Edward Mock was killed by a roof fall at Consolidation Coal Company's West Virginia Blacksville No. 2 mine. Mock was a general laborer with 38 years experience underground.

On September 11, 28-year-old Julius Walker III was crushed between a power generator and a rib in the Adger, Alabama Shoal Creek Coal Mine operated by Drummond Company. Walker had begun working at the mine at the age of 21.



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