

Coal miner killed in southern Illinois

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A southern Illinois coal miner was crushed in a wall collapse Monday, bringing to 19 the number of US miners killed on the job this year, and five in the past month.

Dallas Dwaine Travelstead, 36, died just before 2 a.m. in M-Class Mining's MC#1 Mine in Franklin County. The mine is a large underground retreat mining operation owned by billionaire Chris Cline.

Travelstead, who had been working at the mine for only 26 weeks, was working at the rear wall, or face, of the mine. According to a preliminary report by the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), Travelstead was shoveling coal and loose rock when "the victim received crushing injuries when a solid piece of coal and cap rock rolled onto the victim's mid to lower torso." The slab was approximately five by two feet, and two feet thick. The MSHA report included no details about rescue attempts. He was pronounced dead at the Franklin Hospital emergency room about an hour after the accident.

Travelstead had 16 years' mining experience. A resident of Marion, Illinois, he leaves behind two children.

"I'm not sure any one thing can be pointed to," Illinois Department of Resources spokesman Chris McCloud commented to the *Southern Illinoisan* newspaper. "Coal mining is an inherently dangerous job and comes with some obvious risks but any fatality is tragic."

Illinois Coal Association President Phil Gonet weighed in, stating, "These are very safe mines, but it is troubling that an accident happened."

The fatal accident raises to four the number of Illinois miners killed in 2013. This is the highest fatality figure for the state in decades, and far from being inexplicable, reflects a return by coal companies to the region's extensive coal basin in search of cheaper

production.

Chris Cline, owner of the mine, is head of the private firms Foresight Reserves and The Cline Group, the parent company of Hillsboro Energy, Gogebic Taconite and others. Cline owns a multitude of mines via LLCs and small operator companies, specializes in buying up lower-quality high sulfur coal seams throughout the US and internationally.

Cline has invested in operations from Ontario to Madagascar. In the US, he controls an estimated 3 billion tons of coal reserves. In the past few years, Cline has spent some \$300 million to secure mining rights and equipment in Illinois.

His companies have lobbied heavily in Illinois, West Virginia and elsewhere. A glance at Illinois state elections donations reveals hundreds of donations, totaling millions of dollars, through Cline's companies—Foresight Energy, Foresight Coal Sales, and others—to Democratic politicians.

Cline has backed the environmental policies of Barack Obama, also a Democrat from Illinois, which require the installation of scrubbers on the country's aging power plants. The requirement would open the way for the burning of coal containing currently unsafe levels of sulfur, like that found in southern Illinois. The seams there are thicker and closer to the surface than the low-sulfur seams in Appalachia, making them cheaper to mine. *Bloomberg* crowned Cline the "new King Coal" in 2010 for his ability to drive up production at longwall mines. Cline stated his goal was to raise annual production in Illinois to 60 million tons a year. Cline also makes a hefty profit through exports. Foresight Energy exports one-third of its production through the New Orleans IC RailMarine, a major shipping terminal he also owns.

In its annual list of the 400 wealthiest Americans, *Forbes* magazine noted that Cline, worth \$1.4 billion, was the "one bright spot" in an industry where smaller

players were going under. Cline's investment in Illinois mines put his costs "at roughly \$22 per ton," according to *Forbes*, "significantly lower than the \$50 per ton incurred at the average mine east of the Mississippi."

This pace of extraction brings with it considerable hazards for the miners.

MC#1 is a retreat mine, where miners cut into previously mined seams from the back of the mine outward, essentially collapsing the mine as they go. Since its acquisition by Cline in 2010, MC#1 has seen at least 43 injuries and at least one other fatality. Because it is non-union, many miners are working on a contractor basis and injuries may not be consistently recorded in the MSHA database.

Over the period, coal tonnage has increased more than tenfold at the mine, from 324,500 to 4.9 million per year.

So far in 2013, the Mine Safety and Health Administration has recorded over 450 safety violations at the mine, including 84 "significant and substantial" (S&S) violations. More than 50 S&S violations in the span of a year is a criterion MSHA uses to characterize a "pattern of violations" at a mine, although in the case of MC#1 and most other flagrantly dangerous operations, the federal safety agency does not apply the designation.

The MSHA database recorded 17 injuries at MC#1 this year, including broken bones from roof-bolting accidents and wall collapses. At least 14 accidents involving a "fall of roof or back" have been reported in the past year.



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