

On-the-job accident kills Ohio coal miner

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A coal miner was killed November 23 while working in an underground retreat mine in southern Ohio. The death brings to 20 the number of US coal miners killed on the job this year. Thirty-eight miners have been killed in all extraction operations this year.

Ryan Lashley, a 32-year-old shieldman with five years' mining experience, was operating a shearing machine on a section of wall in the Century Mine when the machine severed a high pressure hydraulic hose. According to a preliminary report from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), Lashley was struck by a massive discharge of hydraulic fluid "causing fatal injuries."

The MSHA report indicates that a miner trainee actuated an emergency stop on the shearer and notified a supervisor at the headgate, who called for an ambulance. "The EMTs did not detect vital signs when they attended to the victim," the report states.

The Century Mine is operated by American Energy Corporation, a subsidiary of coal baron Robert E. Murray's Murray Energy. It is located in far southeastern Ohio near the West Virginia border in the village of Beallsville, a community that made national headlines in the 1960s for having the highest Vietnam War death toll per capita of any town in America. The region has long been plagued by poverty and unemployment.

A memorial page on the Campbell-Plumly-Milburn Funeral Home's obituary listings recorded an outpouring of condolences and grief from family, friends and fellow miners. Many described Lashley as a friendly person and hard worker. Wrote one co-worker, "We will be thinking of him every time we turn on the lights!"

A miner speaking on behalf of his comrades in the Ohio Valley expressed sympathy: "I never knew or met Ryan, but being a coal miner myself and knowing he was a fellow coal miner is all I need to know. I am very

sure he was an honest and hard-working man and loved his job." Another wrote, "Being a retired coal miner from American Energy and Saginaw Mine with 40 years of mining, I know the worry of our loved ones is always with us."

A West Virginia miner spoke on behalf of his co-workers: "We, the employees of Premium Energy, a surface mine owned by Alpha Natural Resources, located at Wharncliff, in Mingo County WV, express our sorrow in the loss of your loved one. Know that we are praying for you in this time of sorrow."

One resident expressed the worry of mining families in the region: "Although I did not know Ryan, I have a son who has worked at Century Mine for about 3 months. It seems like all I have to do is close my eyes and imagine it was my son and I know what that pain would be like."

The Century Mine is a dangerous operation. MSHA data indicates the mine has registered at least 33 injuries since January, including four in the past month. Hundreds have been injured since Murray Energy opened operations there in 2000, and a miner was killed in 2011. The mine has received 275 safety citations since the beginning of this year, including 86 significant and substantial (S&S) citations. These are violations considered so serious that the hazards pose imminent, life-threatening dangers to the workers on site.

Just two weeks before Lashley was killed, a miner at the Century Mine was transported by medical helicopter to Morgantown for injuries resulting from his being pinned between the wall of the mine and a continuous mining machine.

Murray Energy, the largest privately held coal producer in the US, is expanding throughout Appalachia. Just days before the fatal accident at Century, the company concluded a \$3.5 billion deal to acquire five Consol Energy mines in West Virginia.

The acquisition doubles the company's annual tonnage and makes Murray the fifth largest coal producer in the nation.

"It worked out well," Raymond James Financial Inc. analyst Jim Rollyson told industry journal *The Deal*. "They're lower cost mines, so they can survive against \$3.50 natural gas, especially if they can be made more cost effective."

Robert Murray holds billions of tons of coal reserves across Appalachia, the coal basin of Illinois, and in the Western US. In 2007, Murray's Crandall Canyon Mine in Utah was the scene of a series of roof collapses that took the lives of six miners and three emergency responders. Murray vociferously denied that the collapses were due to retreat mining practices and insisted an earthquake was to blame. A subsequent investigation found that the collapses caused the seismic activity, not the other way around. Murray settled a legal action against the company by paying \$1.85 million in fines.

A long-time Republican financial backer, Murray last made headlines when he hosted 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney at a staged rally at the Century Mine. Miners were ordered to attend the rally without pay and donate to the Romney campaign or risk being demoted or having their bonuses revoked. After miners contacted the local radio station complaining about the rally and the lack of wages for the day, Murray Energy Chief Operating Officer Robert Moore explained, "Attendance was mandatory but no one was forced to attend the event."



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