

Wyoming coal miner killed

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A contract worker was killed October 18 at Peabody Energy's North Antelope Rochelle Mine in Wyoming, the largest coal mine in the United States. Fifty-one year old Darwin Lee Reimer of Gillette was the second worker to lose his life at the site since June and the 13th coal miner to die in 2014. Overall, 33 miners have been killed in accidents at coal, metal, and stone mining operations across the US this year.

The North Antelope Rochelle Mine is located in the Powder Basin Region of Wyoming about an hour south of Gillette.

Federal investigators from the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) have released few details other than to say that the miner died after his truck went over a high wall and the victim was ejected from his vehicle. The Campbell County Sheriff's office told Basin Radio news that emergency responders received a call from the mine at 10:36 p.m.

On June 4, 25-year-old Joshua Wishard was killed when he was crushed between the hood and frame of an impact crusher machine, according to MSHA. Wishard had less than half a year's experience as a miner at the time of his death.

Peabody, the largest private-sector coal company in the world with assets of more than \$14 billion, issued a pat statement Saturday saying it was "deeply saddened by this incident," and would be pursuing its own investigation.

In the past five years, coal production in the Powder Basin Region has steadily climbed, partly in response to the economic contraction and the need to lower extraction costs. The region is one of the largest low-sulfur coal sources in the world and, within the US, offers a far less labor-intensive terrain for extraction than the Illinois or Appalachian coal regions. The North Antelope Rochelle Mine currently produces over 110 million tons of coal each year.

The non-union mine employs about 1,500 workers, most of them contractors who work three open pits using heavy equipment. The coal is processed at four hoppers,

transported to silos, and loaded directly into train cars at a staggering rate of 20,000 tons per hour.

Peabody prides itself on efficiency, stating on its web site that "The complex uses three draglines and five truck-and-shovel fleets for overburden removal and operates on two 12-hour shifts per day, 365 days per year."

This pace of production has, unsurprisingly, created unsafe working conditions. Three contract miners have been killed since 2009, and at least 67 others have been injured, according to MSHA statistics.

Since the beginning of the year, the mine has been cited nearly 60 times for safety violations, according to MSHA records, although many of the citations have been issued to companies working as subcontractors for Peabody. On October 9, inspectors issued two "significant & substantial" (S&S) violations over inadequate mine surface maintenance, including of "overhanging highwalls and banks... and other unsafe ground conditions." S&S violations are those which inspectors determine present the threat of imminent injury or death to employees.

The energy-rich states of the Western and North Central US have seen an explosion of the mining and extraction industries in the past decade. Presented as a bright spot with jobs available for those willing to endure brutal winters and poor living conditions, the region has also seen an increase in industrial accidents and social problems for which it lacks public infrastructure. Rural hospitals unequipped to deal with severe trauma have reported being overwhelmed by thousands of accident victims, most of who are young and have little ability to pay bills should they survive.

An incident October 9 at the North Antelope Rochelle rail loop provides a glimpse into the realities of work in the energy fields. Twenty-two-year-old train driver Derek Skyler Brux was charged with reckless endangerment and destruction of property after allegedly unhooking coal cars from a locomotive and driving it down one of the mine's rail loops. In an affidavit, Brux allegedly said he was upset at his supervisor's response to poor working

conditions. According to the *Gillette News Record*, Brux was suicidal.

Other recent coal mine fatalities

On **October 7**, Pineville, Kentucky mine utility man Justin Maze was crushed by a slab of rock measuring eight by six feet long, and 16 inches thick at the Tinsley Branch HWM 61 mine. Maze, 31, had climbed about 37 feet inside a seam to retrieve a broken piece of machinery, according to the MSHA investigation.

The mine is a small open pit mine operated by Commonwealth Mining LLC, a shell company of Cox Enterprises. Cox Enterprises is itself a subsidiary of Nally & Hamilton Enterprises, a Bardstown-based company that owns multiple mountaintop removal mine sites in the state and has been sued for several deaths related to flooding in the past five years.

On **September 16**, a Utah man was crushed in a powered haulage accident at the non-union West Ridge Mine, operated by West Ridge Resources, Inc. The victim, 46-year-old Alejandro Ramirez, had 10 years' experience in mining.

The underground mine is owned by Robert E. Murray, CEO of Murray Energy, one of the largest coal companies in the US. Murray is also the owner of the Crandall Canyon Mine in Utah, where six miners were killed in 2007. In late 2012, Murray abruptly announced the layoff of 102 West Ridge miners, cutting the workforce at the mine nearly in half.

A day earlier, on **September 15**, 53-year-old Barry N. Duncan was killed when the bulldozer he was operating at the Jasper, Alabama Manchester Mine went over a 50-foot highwall. The non-union surface mine is operated by Black Warrior Minerals, Inc.



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