

West Virginia coal miner killed in explosion

Naomi Spencer
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A West Virginia coal miner has died from burns sustained in a fire July 29 at a Wyoming County mine notorious for accidents and safety violations.

According to the state Office of Miners' Health, Safety and Training, mine maintenance supervisor Donald Workman was welding with another miner at the surface of the underground Road Fork #51 mine when the shaft below suddenly ignited.

A statement from the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) detailed that the two miners were "performing welding repairs on a dewatering pump located on the surface near a shaft. The miners were welding threaded blocks that would be used to fasten guarding for the shaft."

The miner who was with Workman told investigators he heard a roaring noise and moved away from the pit, but Workman was in the direct line of the blast. The survivor said a large blue flame blew out of the shaft.

Workman, 58, of Gilbert, West Virginia, suffered second- and third-degree burns. He was transported to a local medical facility where he died August 4. He had been the maintenance supervisor at Road Fork #51 since 2004.

Workman's death brings to seven the number of coal miners killed on the job in the US this year. It is the third fatality in a West Virginia mine since January.

Road Fork #51 is operated by Spartan Mining Company, which is a subsidiary of Alpha Natural Resources, one of the largest coal producers in the US. The operation employs 156 miners, mostly underground. Unlike other mines in the region, the pit has been increasing its output in the past few years.

MSHA data indicates that in the past five years, as the rest of the industry has been decimated, Road Fork #51's annual production has more than doubled. In 2010, the mine produced 291,581 tons for the year. In the first six months of 2016, miners extracted 367,286 tons. The ramping up in production has not coincided

with a proportionate increase in employment, let alone an improvement in conditions.

The mine, located between the towns of Pineville and Wyoming, has a history that predates MSHA records, and has changed hands numerous times, from Consol Energy up to the mid-1970s, National Mines Corp. until 2005, and Massey Energy until it was acquired by Alpha Natural Resources.

In June 2011, Alpha purchased Massey in a \$7.1 billion deal. Alpha later agreed to a \$210 million settlement with the Justice Department, in exchange for immunity from criminal liability for the deaths of 29 miners at Massey's Upper Big Branch Mine or accidents at other former Massey mines, including Road Fork #51. The company's immunity was based on assurances to the Obama administration that Alpha would improve safety conditions at the Massey mines.

In a series of "blitz" inspections in May 2012, MSHA inspectors found that not only were improvements not implemented at Road Fork #51, the hazards were egregious enough to warrant immediate evacuation of the mine.

In fact, MSHA officials arriving at the mine for an inspection found management "attempting to locate the source of thick smoke" emanating from the site while miners were still underground. Smoke and carbon monoxide detectors and fire suppression systems were inoperable, and explosive coal dust had accumulated in layers of up to 18 inches thick in places.

When MSHA issued an "imminent danger" order to the mine, the Obama administration swiftly intervened on Alpha's behalf to keep operations running. US attorney Booth Goodwin praised the company's "substantial progress in improving safety," declaring, "The company has made great strides in addressing the systemic problems it inherited after the merger."

Likewise, the West Virginia Office of Miners' Health, Safety, and Training downplayed the dangers in

the mine, claiming that the “thick smoke” incident MSHA inspectors had witnessed had produced “no fire and no CO” and only a “light coating of rock dust was on the belt.”

In reviewing the data, it is clear that the occurrence of a fatal accident was only a matter of time. Near misses and injuries are reported with alarming frequency.

Injuries have increased sharply in the mine over the past year. In the first six months of 2016, MSHA records indicate at least 11 injuries, for an incidence rate of 14.15—compared to a national injury incidence rate of 3.56 for comparable mines.

The mine also far exceeds the industry average on MSHA’s “Injury Severity Measure.” So far this year, the mine has been cited 145 times for safety violations, including for inadequate roof supports, inoperable fire detection and suppression systems, and neglect of other basic safety measures.

In the past 12 months, the mine has been issued 65 “significant and substantial” citations—a designation reserved for life-threatening hazards. Although this exceeds MSHA’s threshold of 50 such citations determining a “pattern of violations” that would trigger higher scrutiny of the mine by inspectors, the federal agency does not consider Road Fork #51 as a pattern violator.

Like other major coal producers, Alpha declared bankruptcy in 2015 in order to carry out a restructuring at the expense of the jobs, wages and pensions of miners. Last January, a federal bankruptcy judge approved Alpha’s request to pay 15 high-ranking executives up to \$11.9 million in bonuses during 2016.



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