# 1 worker killed, another missing in Kentucky coal prep plant collapse

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Two workers were buried under rubble when an abandoned 11-story coal preparation plant collapsed near the community of Pilgrim, in Martin County, Kentucky, Tuesday evening. One of the men, located alive but trapped from the waist down, died Wednesday afternoon. The other remains missing.

The men, whose names have not yet been released, were contractors working to strip and salvage equipment in the building ahead of demolition. The massive concrete and steel structure is part of the Pontiki mining complex owned by Oklahoma-based Alliance Resource Partners L.P. (ARLP), the second-largest coal producer in the United States. The entire complex was shuttered in 2013 after the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) ordered it to temporarily close out of safety concerns. ARLP laid off 142 Martin County miners on the spot.

By all indications, after ARLP sold the plant to Revelation Energy in 2014, which then sold it to Lexington Coal Company in 2018, the mine complex was abandoned and the prep plant was left to deteriorate where it stood.

According to Inez-based newspaper the *Mountain Citizen*, witnesses in the area of the prep plant described the sound of the collapse as loud as an explosion: "A large cloud of dust was visible for several miles and debris flew through the air for hundreds of feet."

Emergency crews from across eastern Kentucky were called in to assist with rescue through the night. On Wednesday morning, Governor Andy Beshear signed an emergency declaration to mobilize more rescue personnel. The structure is unstable, and local rescuers have reportedly been digging through rubble with their bare hands.

"It's my understanding that the coal company sold it for basically scrap," Martin County Sheriff John Kirk told reporters during a press conference Wednesday. Kirk said the scrapping had been going on inside the dilapidated structure for nearly eight months. "They fall them, you know, cut torch and fall them in sections. We believe that's what happened, that it just didn't fall the way they had projected it to fall."

One could be forgiven for imagining ARLP was a cash-strapped local operator. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The company recently reported third-quarter revenue of $636.5 million, with annual revenue of $2.4 billion in 2022—up by nearly a billion dollars over 2021. ARLP's president and CEO, Joseph W. Craft III, is worth an estimated $1.4 billion.

The Pontiki Mine is a sprawling underground complex near the town of Inez in Martin County, which is located north of Pike County, Kentucky, on the West Virginia border. The area's seams have long been a rich source of low-sulfur bituminous coal used in US power plants for energy production.

Pontiki opened in 1977 as a continuous mining operation underground with the prep plant above it capable of processing 1,000 tons of coal per hour. In 2013, the year ARLP shuttered Pontiki, the site produced 634,000 tons of coal.

During the 2008–2013 recession, coal company after coal company cited falling prices and demand to declare bankruptcy, idle less profitable mines, evade paying environmental and health damages for destructive activities, and, most importantly, offload its pensions and health obligations to thousands of miners and retirees.

At the height of the recession, a great number of these companies were being acquired by giant hedge funds as part of their speculative portfolios. Others were retooling themselves for natural gas or even “green energy” concerns. In its 2013 Pontiki layoff announcement, ARLP noted that it was “constructing a new mine in southern Indiana and is purchasing and funding development of reserves, constructing surface facilities and making equity investments in a new mining complex in southern Illinois.”

In the decade since, ARLP has expanded its mineral and natural gas extraction operations and, in its most recent corporate filing, reported coal reserves of 1.7 billion tons across the Illinois and Appalachian coal basins.

ARLP has also invested $50 million into electric vehicle battery production and announced plans to construct “North America’s first commercial scale manufacturing facility, located near Hopkinsville, Kentucky, producing cathode materials for electric vehicle batteries.” The 1-million-square-foot battery plant will be in “close proximity to ARLP’s western Kentucky mining operations.” For this “green” initiative in the so-called “battery-belt” of the environmentally distressed American South, ARLP has received a staggering $480 million in grants from the Department of Energy.

The Martin County accident comes amidst a dramatic uptick in mining fatalities.

Forty-two miners have been killed on the job in the United States so far this year, according to MSHA, up 17 percent over last year. The death toll comes amidst lower production, with fewer than 1,000 coal mines remaining in operation.

Last month, the federal Inspector General’s Office audited MSHA’s public accident injury data. The analysis found a total breakdown in MSHA inspections.

Nearly 1,600 mine inspections conducted between 2018–2021 were “incomplete” or “inaccurate,” “despite reporting a nearly 100 percent completion rate,” according to the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*.

During that time frame, the Inspector General’s Office found “92 accidents or injuries, including fatalities” occurred in mines that were listed as non-operational. The office found MSHA issued only one violation for an operator failing to notify the federal agency that it was running a mine not listed as active. The data back to the year 2000 found more than 1,200 accidents, some fatal, at mines listed as “new mine,” “temporarily idle” or “abandoned,” exempting them from mandatory inspections.

MSHA reported inspector workloads rising with higher production in mines, “including production related to infrastructure investments spurred by the Inflation Reduction Act and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.” In other words, the Biden administration has handed public funds hand over fist to the coal operators while underfunding oversight. Although the federal agency requested $28 million to fund mine inspections this year, Congress has cut its mine safety budget a further 6 percent.