

# Search for coal miner trapped in flooded West Virginia mine continues for third day

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A coal miner remains missing and trapped after catastrophic flooding struck the Rolling Thunder Mine in Drennen, Nicholas County, in central West Virginia, over the weekend. The miner—a crew foreman whose name has not yet been released—was assisting his team to safety when he was caught by rising waters.

The torrent was unleashed deep inside the mine when an unknown pocket was struck. The incident occurred about three-quarters of a mile into the Rolling Thunder Mine, which is owned by Alpha Metallurgical Resources (AMR). Other crew members managed to escape, but the foreman was overtaken by the flood.

The accident was reported at around 1:30 p.m. Saturday to the county emergency management office; all other miners on the team have been accounted for. The area remains flooded and the extent of the devastation below ground is still unclear.

Rescue operations began promptly and have been complicated by challenging conditions such as murky water, unstable underground air pockets, and the sheer depth of the site. For three days, crews have coordinated with county officials, state agencies, and national cave rescue experts.

Divers are working to locate any air pockets that may have provided a temporary refuge for the missing miner. Teams have employed underwater drones to try and pinpoint his location while simultaneously pumping water from the flooded section and drilling boreholes to lower water levels more rapidly.

The complexity of the effort reflects both the seriousness of the situation and the persistent danger in the coal mining industry.

The West Virginia Office of Miners' Health, Safety, and Training (OMHST) and the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) have been present on the scene. West Virginia Governor Patrick Morrisey, while covering for the \$2 billion mining corporation, has postured as a friend of the miners saying, "There is nothing that we would spare to try to save the life of the miner," and assuring that all available resources, including national experts, are being

utilized in the search operation. The company has not issued a single word on the disaster.

Nicholas County Commissioner Garrett Cole described the scene as one of relentless work and notes that while divers have entered the mine more than once, the process of pumping out enough water to allow exploration remains an immense challenge.

AMR has not answered critical questions about safety protocols and mine conditions at Rolling Thunder Mine. Backing up the governor, UMWA President Cecil Roberts and Region 2 Director Mike Dalpiaz have stepped in to divert and contain the anger of coal miners.

Roberts issued a statement that did not hold the company or the government responsible, saying, "This disaster is a reminder of the risks our miners confront daily, and we will do everything possible to support our brothers, their families, and the teams working underground now."

Dalpiaz went further making the absurd statement that the UMWA, "stands ready to ensure that safety remains the priority, and we urge the company and regulators not to cut corners during this perilous search."

AMR, with headquarters in Bristol, Tennessee, controls 11 underground mines and multiple surface mines in West Virginia and Virginia. The mine originally opened in 2005, employs about 25 workers, and extracts metallurgical coal, with property owned outright through Nicholas Contura LLC, an Alpha subsidiary.

Rolling Thunder's coal seam extends along and below the drainage of TwentyMile Creek, with extensive historical records from prior operators. An engineering report prepared for AMR in February 2025 stated that "no significant hydrologic concerns" existed for further coal extraction at the property, which raises critical questions about the subordination of a mine safety evaluation that failed to anticipate this flood to the corporate and financial interests at AMR.

Once again, like every workplace disaster, the events at Rolling Thunder Mine show how the capitalism subordinates life-threatening risks faced by miners to the drive for profit.

Just days before the Rolling Thunder flood, on Thursday, November 6, 25-year-old Joey Mitchell Jr. was killed at Mettiki Coal's Mountain View Mine in Mount Storm, Tucker County. Mitchell died before dawn while working underground; another individual was seriously injured and airlifted to the hospital.

While Governor Morrisey was quick to mourn Mitchell's death and call for West Virginians to keep his family, friends and fellow miners "in our thoughts and prayers," details about the cause of the accident remain undisclosed, continuing the stonewalling policy among coal industry operators and local authorities.

According to reports, this was not the first fatality at the Mettiki Coal site. On January 16, 2014, Daniel Lambka, a 20-year-old worker, was crushed to death in a coal feeder accident at the Mountain View Mine. MSHA officials determined that the coal company had been negligent by failing to prevent the equipment from moving.

Mettiki Coal's parent company, Alliance Resource Partners, also had safety violations at other operations.

In 2010, a roof collapse at the Dotiki Mine in Kentucky claimed the lives of two miners, Justin Travis and Michael Carter. That same year, the Dotiki operation accumulated 216 MSHA citations.

There have been at least three other mining fatalities in 2025 in West Virginia. These include:

- On January 29, Steven Fields, a 55-year-old drill operator, was killed at the Twilight Surface Mine in Boone County.
- In February, Billy Stalker, 46, a contractor with Wright Concrete Underground LLC, died in an underground incident.
- On August 26, Eric Bartram, 41, a preparation plant electrician, was fatally injured at the Marfork Preparation Plant in Raleigh County.

The number of fatal mine accidents in 2025 has been rising at an alarming rate despite the sharp reduction in mining employment. According to MSHA, fatalities reached 18 by early August, outpacing 2024, which had 12 by the same point. The industry is on pace for about 30 fatalities for 2025, matching 2022's year-end total. The increase in death rates comes amid ongoing attacks on safety enforcement, including funding cuts, elimination of federal programs, and a drive to lower standards and oversight by MSHA and OSHA.

Wayne Palmer, Trump's nominee, who was confirmed by Congress for Assistant Secretary of Labor for MSHA, previously held executive posts in mining and mineral industry business associations.

Jordan Barab, a former OSHA official and publisher of the "Confined Spaces" blog, continues to tally the rising

fatalities, stressing that they are neither accidental nor random but the direct product of deliberate corporate and government policies that place profits over lives.

Among the workplace deaths reported by Barab on Tuesday alone were 14 workers killed in the UPS plane crash in Louisville, Kentucky; a postal worker killed in a collision with a pick-up truck in Aliceville, Alabama; and a lawn maintenance worker was killed when his lawn mower rolled onto him in Bryan County, Oklahoma.

On Saturday morning, a postal worker in Allen Park, Michigan—a suburb of Detroit—was found dead after becoming trapped in a mail handling machine at the United States Postal Service facility. The 36-year-old man, identified as a maintenance worker, was discovered by firefighters after his wife contacted authorities when he failed to return home following his shift.

He had been stuck in the machine for approximately six to eight hours before his body was found. As is the case with many workplace fatalities, the USPS facility remains operational while federal authorities are conducting an investigation. No details about the circumstances leading to the accident have been released.

Seven months ago, Ronald Adams Sr. was crushed to death at the Stellantis Dundee Engine Plant in Michigan when a automatic hoist cycled unexpectedly during maintenance. The Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) says the case is "still open" and Adams's family and co-workers remain without answers from the company or the United Auto Workers, although full production has resumed.

The rise in workplace deaths is taking place globally. As enormous wealth is concentrated in fewer hands—with the billionaire elite soon growing into the trillionaire elite—workers are being killed and injured at alarming rates.

With the approval of both the Democrats and Republicans and the backing of the union officialdom, owners are being shielded while workers die, are maimed or denied compensation, and their families are left with no answers.

This situation will not be reversed by either capitalist party or the union apparatus. Workers themselves must act—organizing independent rank-and-file committees to enforce safety, demand accountability and safeguard lives through direct intervention in the workplace.



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