

West Virginia coal miner is found dead after a 5-day search in flooded mine

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The body of Steve Lipscomb, a 38-year-old father and veteran coal miner, who had been trapped underground in the Rolling Thunder Mine in West Virginia for five days, was recovered Thursday morning, ending any hope he may have survived despite overwhelming odds.

The rescue effort began Saturday night, as rescuers and family members held out the possibility that Lipscomb had reached an air pocket and was awaiting rescue.

Instead, after battling about 20 feet of murky, frigid floodwater and shifting debris, search teams, equipped with breathing apparatus and underwater cameras, located his body near the flooded section of the southeast quadrant of the mine, in an area known as the “Longwall room.”

Medical personnel pronounced him dead on the scene, confirming the outcome that had been feared for days.

Lipscomb, a lifelong resident of Man, West Virginia, was known among his friends as a dedicated, reliable worker and a loving father of three. He had worked at the Rolling Thunder Mine for over a decade, most recently as a maintenance lead responsible for safety checks and equipment repairs across several shafts.

A post by a friend on Facebook read:

For those who don't know, Foreman Steve Lipscomb fearlessly returned into a flooded coal mine after an accident, to ensure that no man was left behind. Steve was last seen by his crew members as he treaded into the mine, toward the floodwaters, to ensure the safety of his brothers.

Steve was also an underground EMT-M and during his career in the coal mines, always prioritized protecting and helping others. Steve was a Husband and a Father, and he was a friend to many.

He gave everything he had to protect his brothers both above ground and below.

Friends and family recalled his tireless commitment to his coworkers and his reputation for assisting new hires in the labyrinthine and dangerous corridors underground. Rolling Thunder, which initially opened in the late 1990s, is one of several mines operated by Alpha Metallurgical Resources, Inc. (AMR). The Tennessee-based coal giant owns some of the largest and most profitable metallurgical coal mines in Appalachia.

Metallurgical coal mines extract a specific grade of coal, known as coking coal, which is used primarily in steel production. Metallurgical coal differs from thermal coal, which is primarily used for generating electricity.

Metallurgical coal has unique physical and chemical properties—such as higher carbon content and lower ash, sulfur and moisture—that make it ideal for transforming iron ore into steel in blast furnaces. This coal is heated in low-oxygen environments to produce coke, a hard, porous material that serves as both a fuel and a reactant necessary for making steel. About 70 percent of global steel is made using coke derived from metallurgical coal, making this type of coal critical for industrial steel production and construction projects worldwide.

In a brief statement released after the discovery of Lipscomb's body, AMR addressed itself for the first time to the tragedy in order to state it was sending “the company's heartfelt condolences to Mr. Lipscomb's family, friends, and coworkers.” The statement continued, “We are committed to supporting his loved ones and the Rolling Thunder team in the days and weeks ahead.”

The accident that led to the drowning of Lipscomb remains under investigation by both federal and state authorities. According to initial reports, the disaster struck late Saturday afternoon when a routine maintenance shift was disrupted by a sudden inrush of water from an abandoned adjacent mine.

The speed and volume of the flooding overwhelmed recently installed drainage systems and cut off several workers from the main egress. While most of the crew managed to escape, Lipscomb, working to secure electrical panels, was trapped by the rapidly rising water.

Emergency responders battled hazardous conditions in pitch-dark tunnels over the next five days in hopes of reaching a survivable air pocket—a scenario that, while desperately rare, has occurred in previous mining disasters.

At a press conference on Thursday afternoon, AMR CEO Andrew Eidson repeated the company line and read from a prepared statement: “Today's news weighs heavily on all of us at Alpha, and especially on those in the Rolling Thunder family. We remain steadfast in our commitment to safety and transparency, and we will cooperate fully with all inquiries to ensure that we learn everything possible from this tragedy.”

Eidson, who became CEO of AMR in 2022 after a lengthy stint in international energy finance, was paid \$8.6 million in total compensation last year, a figure that includes substantial stock

awards and performance-based bonuses. There is no doubt that the death of Lipscomb is a direct product of the drive for increased coal extraction. This is the basis for the financial performance of the company, whose stock is traded publicly on the stock market.

According to officially published numbers, AMR had been losing money in recent quarters, but this was reversed in 2025 with net income of \$41.7 million in Q3 and \$46.1 million in Q2. This means that while Alpha remains one of the largest metallurgical coal producers in the US, it faced negative earnings through most of 2025. This is reflected in the drop in the stock value of AMR, which fell by three quarters from a peak of \$402 per share in early 2024 to a low of \$105 in June.

CEO Eidson's compensation is vastly out of proportion to the average wage earned by workers like Lipscomb. US government data puts the average annual income of a coal miner in West Virginia at approximately \$70,000, though many, particularly those in riskier underground operations, take home far less after deductions, with unpredictable overtime and mandatory layoffs affecting take-home pay. It is these men and women, who daily risk death and serious injury, who create the vast fortunes enjoyed by executives and shareholders.

Republican West Virginia Governor Patrick Morrisey released a statement shortly after the news broke Thursday morning, stating his "heart breaks for the family and friends of Steve Lipscomb," and then giving empty promises to "redouble our commitment to mine safety until no one faces such tragedy again." Such statements have been made for generations by politicians from both capitalist parties while the deaths have continued.

Despite these vacuous assurances, the tragedy at Rolling Thunder Mine is part of a trend in mining fatalities at AMR and throughout the industry. Since January, three other miners have died at AMR-operated sites, triple the number of fatalities in 2024. Nationally, there has also been a rise in coal mining deaths for the first time in a decade, with 25 killed in 2025 so far, up from 18 deaths in 2024 and 15 in 2023. These numbers also do not capture the additional toll of chronic illness and non-fatal accidents that afflict miners in silence each year.

The danger posed by mine flooding is hardly new. The history of American mining is strewn with similar tragedies—most notably the 2006 Sago Mine disaster, where 12 miners perished after being trapped for days by a methane explosion followed by catastrophic water ingress. Earlier, in 1993, seven men drowned at the Round Top mine in Kentucky, after a retaining wall collapsed, sending thousands of gallons of water into active tunnels.

Each incident prompted a flurry of promises, regulatory hearings and so-called reforms, but the underlying realities of cost-cutting, unsafe conditions and corners cut in the name of profit have not been addressed. Instead, such incidents are becoming more common, not less.

In addition to refusing to place blame at the feet of the company and its executives, the role of the corrupt United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) bureaucracy has been central to the collapse of safety in the mines. While UMWA President Cecil Roberts was quick to issue a statement that attempted to divert attention from the company and its drive for increased production and profitability as the source of Lipscomb's death, the union has

since remained silent after the company started issuing its condolences to the friends and family of the deceased miner.

Steve Lipscomb's death is by no means an isolated accident. It is part of the broader and accelerating rise in workplace fatalities. The US has witnessed a year-over-year jump in preventable industrial deaths across several sectors, from railways and petrochemical plants to warehouses and meatpacking facilities.

The common denominator in all of the cases is the relentless pursuit of profit for corporate executives and shareholders, which is prioritized above workers' lives and safety. While corporate stock prices are being bid to astronomical levels, figures like Elon Musk—whose board has approved a \$1 trillion compensation package for him—represent the grotesque chasm between the wealth hoarded by a tiny parasitic elite and the price paid in lives lost by those whose labor creates it.

Earlier this year, Ronald Adams Sr., a worker for Stellantis in Dundee, Michigan, was killed on the job in circumstances that were entirely preventable. In the aftermath of Adams' death, the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy closed ranks with corporate management and state and federal safety agencies to cover up the death. Seven months later officials from the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MIOSHA) say their investigation is "still ongoing."

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) mounted a campaign for a full, transparent public investigation, denouncing both the secrecy surrounding Adams' death and the treatment of his grieving family by Stellantis, MIOSHA and the UAW of indifference and contempt.

It is only through the independent fight by rank-and-file workers to gain control of the workplace that safety protocols will be established and followed so future injuries and deaths are prevented. A campaign by rank-and-file workers to establish their own committees that are democratically controlled can only be conducted through a struggle against the capitalist system itself and for socialism, where the working class reorganizes the resources of society under public ownership based upon social need and not profit.



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