

Destabilizing blasting powder responsible for mine accident

By CHARLES WOLFE
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TOPMOST, Ky. (AP) — Blasting powder still inside a Kentucky mine where an explosion killed eight men is breaking down and becoming "increasingly dangerous" as it destabilizes, the state mines commissioner says.

United Mine Workers President Sam Church said Wednesday the mine operators should be prosecuted for allowing unsafe work practices in the mine, where, he contended, "there was loose powder all over."

In Tennessee, meanwhile, an official said there was evidence that methane gas caused a blast that killed 13 miners on Tuesday.

The blast Monday afternoon at the Adkins Coal Co.'s No. 18 mine in Topmost occurred minutes after the eight miners had hauled 25 cases of powder explosive 2,500 feet into the shaft, Church said.

Twenty-two cases of explosives remained inside the mine today, and the task of removing them became more urgent Wednesday when "we learned this powder is breaking down," Kentucky Mines and Minerals Commissioner Wilard Stanley said in an interview outside the mine.

As with conventional dynamite, the blasting powder becomes unstable and increasingly dangerous as it deteriorates, Stanley said.

After visiting the mine Wednesday, Church seemed convinced the explosion was caused by blasting powder and carelessness in its handling. He said there was evidence of unsafe practices by the miners, but he didn't blame the miners "because it's management's job to see it don't happen."

"Practices like this — management has to know it exists," Church said. "They

should be prosecuted for allowing this to happen."

Mine owner Orville Adkins has been unavailable for comment since the explosion.

There has been no official ruling on the cause of the accident.

In Whitwell, Tenn., where 13 miners were killed Tuesday in an explosion at a mine owned by Tennessee Consolidated Coal Co., federal Mine Safety and Health Administration spokesman John McGrath said officials still don't know the nature of the blast or what caused it.

"I think there's strong evidence" that methane gas caused the blast, said John Parish, Gov. Lamar Alexander's press secretary. "But I don't think anybody is saying that officially."

The accident was the third fatal mine accident within a week in Appalachia. On Dec. 3, three miners were killed in a rock and slate fall in a mine in Bergoo, W. Va.

Five of the miners killed in Tennessee were to be buried today and the remaining eight on Friday in Whitwell and nearby towns in southeastern Tennessee.

McGrath said officials haven't ruled out methane gas as a cause of the explosion. The miners killed in the blast had cut from an active coal-producing part of the mine into an adjoining, previously mined area for additional ventilation, he said.

An inquiry into the Kentucky accident has begun, but many tasks will be delayed until after the last of the eight miners is buried Saturday, Stanley said. That includes a closed hearing by state and federal mine safety officials.

Rock dust from the mine will be analyzed for its combustible and non-combustible components, including carbon and coal dust, he added.

Records at the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration office in Hazard show that 12 men have been killed in the Adkins No. 18 mine since Nov. 3, 1970. The first four deaths involved separate accidents over 11 years.

Small mines like the Adkins No. 18 make up about 15 percent of the industry, but produce 40 percent of its fatalities, Church said. Like other small mines in eastern Kentucky, the Adkins No. 18, which employed 23 men and produced about 250 tons a day, used explosives to blast coal loose so it could be shoveled by an electric scoop.

Such mines don't use the safer but costly "continuous miner," a machine that scoops ore directly from the seam in a steady motion.

Church said blast mining is "the most dangerous type there is."

Tanker overturns

An oil tanker owned by Arthur F. Hazen and Son of 525 Spring Ave. overturned about 10 o'clock this morning while in Squaw Run Village in Wayne Twp. to make a delivery.

The driver, Bob McNutt of Ellwood-New Castle Rd., was reportedly unhurt. State police at the Lawrence County barracks said troopers had been sent to the scene and, although they had not returned by presstime, there was no mention of injuries in early reports.

Wayne Twp. firemen were called at 10:14 a.m., apparently as a precautionary measure, but the two trucks were back at