

# Flames, Gas Spew Fireballs From Mine's Entrance

## Oxygen Continues to Fuel Blaze, Though No Explosions Result

By Mike Gorrell  
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ORANGEVILLE, Emery County — A stubborn fire that claimed the lives of 27 miners last week reached the entrance of the Wilberg Mine near here Wednesday, periodically producing "fireballs" when flames ignited pockets of combustible gases.

The advance of the fire, an anticipated development, will prevent crews indefinitely from sealing the entrance and cutting off the main source of oxygen feeding the fire, said Bob Henrie, a spokesman for Emery Mining Co., which operates the Wilberg Mine for Utah Power and Light Co.

"You're seeing the manifestation of the fire externally now," said Mr. Henrie, who noted that the fire was roughly 300 feet from the entrance Sunday when officials abandoned an attempt to seal the entrance after high levels of combustible methane gas were detected.

### Still Burns Strongly

The fire was still burning strongly Wednesday, seven days after 27 miners succumbed while excavating coal with long-wall equipment nearly 1½ miles into the mine. Rescue crews discovered the bodies of 25 miners and two others are missing and presumed dead. Attempts to recover the bodies were rebuffed Sunday when the fire expanded into the rescue crew's escape tunnel.

Meanwhile, a general memorial service was held Wednesday in Castle Dale (see related story), private fu-

neral services were held for four miners and two funds have been established to provide assistance to families of the victims.

Mr. Henrie said the combination of flames and combustible gases produced fireballs evident at the mine entrance, but no explosions.

"Federal officials monitoring the fire said there have been no explosions and that most methane gas is being consumed by the fire," Mr. Henrie added.

Twelve to 15 portals in East Mountain, with its extensive coal seams that gave life to the Wilberg Mine, must be sealed to reduce the oxygen level feeding the fire.

### Approve Sealings

Mr. Henrie said U. S. Mine Safety and Health Administration officials gave approval Wednesday to seal three portals in the Cottonwood area of the mountain, roughly four miles from the main entrance.

"Sealing these portals not only cuts off oxygen supply but also keeps more smoke in the mine, helping to suffocate the flames," the Emery Mining spokesman said.

He added that it is still "impossible to know" how long it will take for the fire to burn itself out to an extent where workers can safely seal the main entrance and reduce the oxygen supply to the trickle offered by various fractures, faults and fissures in the mountain crust.

"Once we get it sealed, then it's a matter of sophisticated monitoring to

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see how it's moving, where it's moving and how well it's going out," Mr. Henrie said.

Monitoring equipment includes photographic equipment that can detect varying gradations of heat deep beneath the surface and sensitive probes inserted through drill holes to ascertain the presence of certain gases, he maintained.

"The commitment is to extinguish the fire, not just seal off the oxygen supply," Mr. Henrie said, adding that Emery Mining will explore every possible avenue, ranging from dumping millions of gallons of water onto the fire from the company's Deer Creek Mine (in a higher portion of East Mountain), to boring tunnels and pumping foam, inert gas or "whatever it takes onto the fire, from every place oxygen can flow in."

Mr. Henrie said he expects a federal investigation of the accident to begin shortly after the first of the year, even if the mine is not yet open to inspection. "They can investigate more than the physical evidence," he noted.

To help the families of the deceased miners, funds have been established in Helper and Price, respectively, by the Carbon and Emery County United Mine Workers Association Disaster Fund and the Castle Valley Ministerial Association.

The UMWA has received pledges of support from throughout the state as well as from Pennsylvania, Virginia and Kentucky, said disaster-fund chairman Angelo Bera. The UMWA distributed nearly \$2,800 to the bereaved families Christmas Day, but is still awaiting more funds.

Mr. Bera said donations should be sent to the Carbon and Emery County UMWA Disaster Fund, 105 Royal Way, Helper, 84526.

The Castle Valley Ministerial Association, composed of Protestant, Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox religious leaders in the area, established its relief fund at Commercial Security Bank in Price. Donations should be sent to the Disaster Fund, P. O. Box 1107, Price, 84501.