

Sealing of Utah coal mine where 27 died completed

ORANGEVILLE, Utah (AP) — Federal mining officials monitored heat and gas levels in the fiery Wilberg Mine where 27 people died this month, while its operator prepared to resume production in another nearby shaft.

The last of 15 portals to the mine were sealed Saturday night in an attempt to cut off oxygen that feeds the fire, Bob Henrie, a spokesman for Emery Mining Corp., said Sunday.

Federal law requires the seals to remain in place at least 72 hours, and Henrie said it would be several days before it could be known whether there are any other sources of oxygen to the central Utah mine.

"It's not really that we expect it'll be extinguished," he said. "There was a great deal of oxygen sealed inside the mine, and we won't know until later whether there are additional sources of air."

Henrie said the seals also would be closely monitored, and workers may have to reinforce them after several days if leaks are detected.

Twenty-six men and one woman were trapped deep within a section of the mine when fire broke out in the main tunnel Dec. 19.

Because temperatures near the mine's entrance were measured at 1,800 degrees, officials have acknowledged there may not be any remains left to recover. Meanwhile, Emery officials hoped to put the adjacent Deer Creek Mine back into production by the end of the week, Henrie said.

The bodies of 25 miners were found and two others presumed dead, but efforts to recover the bodies ended Dec. 23 when federal officials ordered rescue crews to evacuate because of the danger posed by the fire.

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The Deer Creek Mine is located in the same mountain as the Wilberg, but their entrances are on opposite

sides and at different elevations, Henrie said.

Before the Deer Creek Mine is reopened, crews will have to plug exploratory bore holes and shafts drilled to pump water into the Wilberg mine and build safety seals in the event there is an explosion inside the Wilberg mine, he said.

If the Deer Creek mine goes back into production, about 400 idle miners could be returned to work, Henrie said.

In addition, company officials said they hoped to reopen the nearby Des-Bee-Dove mine, which was closed in March, by late January, he said.

A small fire in a section of the Des-Bee-Dove was sealed earlier this year, but operations were discontinued because the company's other mines were producing sufficient coal until the Wilberg Mine disaster, he said. Its reopening would put about 100 miners back to work.

Henrie said company officials would decide sometime this week how many of about 300 miners left idle by the Wilberg fire would be put to work on maintenance projects outside the Wilberg Mine.

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Jun 14, 2025