

Nation

Collapse of coal pile in West Virginia kills five

The workers, standing atop a bin, were suffocated when a colleague accidentally opened a hatch.

Associated Press

FAIRVIEW, W.Va. — A hatch underneath a huge bin of coal was opened accidentally Thursday, and five workers standing atop the pile suffocated as tons of the finely processed coal collapsed and engulfed them, authorities said.

The five men did not suffer bruises or broken bones, but could not breathe because the coal packed in around them, said Charles H. Koon, county coroner. "The coal just kept sliding on top of them," he said.

The pile collapsed when a worker threw a switch that simultaneously started an adjacent conveyor and opened a door at the bottom of the bin, said John McGrath of the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration, which was investigating the accident at the Consolidated Coal Co. "When that happened, of

course, the coal began to move, engulfing the five men," he said.

Consolidated officials said they were conducting their own investigation and Paul Kvederis of the company said it would be "premature" to comment on McGrath's account.

Rescue crews dug frantically through the coal at the Consolidated Coal Co. but did not find the last of the bodies until more than an hour after the 11 a.m. accident.

The company identified three of the victims as Joseph E. Dunn, 50, of Pittsburgh, senior design manager; Joseph W. Leonard, 29, of

Morgantown, assistant preparation engineer; and Roger B. Alke, 36, of Morgantown, construction supervisor.

The other two victims worked for Industrial Resources of Fairmont, which identified them as Ronald Bell, 39, engineer, and David Kovach, 41, vice president, both of Fairmont.

The five men had been inspecting an overhead conveyor system in the bin, Kvederis said.

After the accident, company officials and sheriff's deputies prevented reporters from entering the mining complex to speak with other employees.

McGrath said preliminary reports indicated that a catwalk holding the men collapsed, but Kvederis said they were on the coal stockpile itself when the accident occurred.

"The men had climbed atop the coal pile to inspect the conveyor system when it collapsed, trapping them," Kvederis said.

Before the report that the door was accidentally opened, Kvederis said the collapse could have been caused by a "a space" or pocket left as successive batches of coal are funneled into the storage bins.

The state mining division was also investigating the accident and had inspectors at the scene of the accident.

The Loveridge operation combines a mine and preparation plant, according to the Keystone Coal Industry Manual. Employment in recent years has ranged as high as 690 at the mine and 59 at the preparation plant, the director said.

The three Consolidation employees were company engineers, Kvederis said. The other two victims worked for an outside contractor, he said.

1986 Loveridge Stockpile Collapse NEWS

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Nov 17, 2025