

Cause sought for collapse that killed 5

FAIRVIEW, W. Va. (AP) — A hearing on what triggered a 10,000-ton coal pile to collapse and bury five men alive has left state mining officials scratching their heads.

Department of Energy deputy director Bart Clay said testimony from Friday's hearing disputes the initial theory that the weight of the men caused a hole within the pile to collapse around them Thursday.

Clay told WBOY-TV after Friday's hearing at the Consolidation Coal Co. mine that plant workers testified that the 40-foot high coal pile had supported a heavy bulldozer the night before.

"To me, if a bulldozer doesn't break through, surely five men are not going to fall through," Clay said.

One of the victims, Joseph Leonard III, 29, of Morgantown, W. Va., is the grandson of Joseph and Helen Leonard, of 2074 Elk Avenue, Pottsville. He is survived by a wife and two children.

An official with the Federal Mine Safety and Health Administration said the collapse may have been caused by workers opening up a hatch underneath the 40-foot pile to dump the coal onto a conveyor belt.

However, "witnesses claim they hadn't run the feeder system under the part where the men went through," Clay told the Clarksburg television station. "That's not quite clear."

Clay said the on-site hearing would continue today and he hoped further testimony would shed more light on the cause of the accident.

"Their weight might have collapsed the pile," MSHA spokesman John McGrath said Friday. "There might have been a void existing in the pile from some time earlier when coal was drawn off the bottom. But that's just one possibility."

All five men were pronounced dead at the scene after frantically-digging workers pulled them from the coal pile, authorities said. The victims were inspecting a cylindrical stacker outside Consolidation's Loveridge preparation plant when the accident occurred just before 11 a.m.

The other victims were identified as Joseph E. Dunn, 50 of Pittsburgh; Roger B. Alke, 36 of Morgantown; Ronald Bell, 39 of Fairmont and David Kovach, 41 of Fairmont.

Company officials had speculated immediately after the accident that a "space" might have caused the pile to shift and cause the coal slide. Mine safety officials said, however, that controls were activated accidentally starting a conveyor into motion underneath the stockpile.

McGrath said that both theories are being investigated.

The accident occurred on a free-standing storage pile of raw coal at the preparation plant site, McGrath said Friday. Consolidation Coal officials said the coal pile was 40 to 50 feet high and contained about 10,000 tons of coal.

"It wasn't inside a silo or any kind of enclosure as we originally thought," McGrath said. "The coal comes out of the mine on a conveyor belt and goes into a stacker, a vertical structure that evenly spreads it out around the pile."

Beneath the pile is a draw-off tunnel where the coal drops on its way to the preparation plant for cleaning and shipping, he said.

"The five people walked onto the pile to examine the stacker because it was damaged," McGrath said. "While they were on the pile, the pile began collapsing and engulfed the five men."