

## Collapse puzzles officials

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.

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."

Inspectors from the federal agency joined Consolidation officials at the site of Thursday's accident to determine what caused the huge coal pile to give way beneath the workers.

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 victims were identified as Joseph E. Dunn, 50 of Pittsburgh; Joseph W. Leonard, 29 of Morgantown; 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.