

Mine rescue was a true test of teams

By Linda Sickler
Of The Southern Illinoisan

The rescue of four fluorspar miners near Cave in Rock last week was a successful trial by fire for two of the Illinois Department of Mines and Minerals' mine rescue teams.

The miners were trapped inside the Ozark Mahoning Mine No. 1, north of Cave in Rock, after a 10-ton truck was engulfed in flames on Jan. 7. IDMM spokeswoman Liz March said the diesel truck apparently caught fire after a hydraulic line ruptured and leaked oil on the hot engine.

The four miners were working near the truck. As the fire raged out of control, they lost their communication link with the surface.

Mine Superintendent Larry Bowers called the IDMM's Springfield office.

Fred Bowman, the department's adminis-

trative director, took the call at 10 a.m. It was the beginning of a long day.

"We sent the rescue folks below," Bowman said.

The "rescue folks" are mine rescue teams from Elizabethtown and Du Quoin. The Elizabethtown team is composed of fluorspar miners from the Ozark Mahoning mine and is headed by Bowers.

That team was activated at 10:10 a.m.

"Those men are primarily working in the immediate area and are fluorspar miners," Bowman said. "But we must have a backup team. Federal law mandates that every mine must have two rescue teams within two hours response time."

So another team was activated at 10:30 a.m. — one composed entirely of state coal mine inspectors, all employees of IDMM.

Donnie McBride of Benton is a member

of that team, which has been based in Du Quoin since Jan 1.

"There was an underground fire in a piece of equipment that was blocking the exit," McBride said. "There were four people on the other side."

A third team — the White County Mine Pattiki Team — was placed on standby, but did not have to be activated. The first team went into the mine at 12:40 p.m. and at 1:25 p.m. Bowman was notified that the four miners were safe.

They had put out the fire themselves, and there were no injuries. The truck was destroyed, but there was little other damage.

Mine company officials were pleased with the professionalism displayed by both rescue teams, March said.

"Mine rescues are not a frequent thing," McBride said. "It doesn't happen very often.

This was about the fourth time for us in three or four years."

"That's what we're trained for," McBride said. "We train constantly year in and year out."

McBride was especially proud of his team's response time on Jan. 7. The team completed its mission in just four to five hours — including travel time.

Darrell George, who supervises the state inspectors' team in Du Quoin, also was impressed with the team's response time. "Everything went off without a hitch," he said.

Rescue team members get respect from coal miners and operators alike. "They're considered the cream of the crop," McBride said.

Team members work on a voluntary basis because they want to help others, McBride said. "Every coal miner wants someone to come and get them in a disaster," he said.

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