

# Three die in construction accident at Gibson mine



Jondi Schmitt/Princeton Daily Clarion, via AP

An accident at an airshaft under construction at the Gibson County Coal construction site near Princeton killed three people yesterday, police said. They were riding in an open bucket that transported people up and down the shaft.

## Open bucket shifts in ventilation shaft, victims fall

AP and Staff Dispatches

PRINCETON, Ind. — Three men riding in a large bucket plunged 500 feet to their deaths yesterday morning in an airshaft being built at a coal mine.

The open-top bucket was somehow “upset” inside the shaft as it was descending and the three men fell to the bottom, said George Zugel, director of safety and health for Frontier-Kemper Constructors Inc. He said he did not know what caused the bucket to shift.

No one else was injured, Zugel said.

The company is building the 550-foot vertical ventilation shaft at the Gibson County Coal mine, about 30 miles north of Evansville. Frontier-Kemper said an investigation had begun.

The Gibson mine is one of seven underground mines in Indiana and was the state’s second-largest coal



By Steve Durbin, The Courier-Journal

producer last year with more than 3.5 million tons.

The Indiana Department of Labor’s Bureau of Mines has opened an investigation into yesterday’s accident and the agency’s top officials were at the site, said spokesman Sean Keefer.

The site, however, was not part of the mine but was in a shaft that had not yet been connected to the mine, said J. Nathan Noland, executive director of the Indiana Coal Council.

“It was not a coal mining accident,” he said. “It was a construction site at a coal mine facility.”

The mine’s owner, Tulsa, Okla.-based Alliance Resource Partners, also said the accident was separate from the mine. “We can’t report on it because it’s not our accident,” said Debbie King, executive assistant for investor relations at Alliance Resource Partners.

The victims’ names were being withheld until their families were notified, Zugel said. A message left at the Gibson County coroner’s office was not returned.

The “sinking bucket” used in the air shaft can hold six to 10 people and is about 6 feet high, worker John Ervin

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# GIBSON

## Accident in airshaft kills 3

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said.

"I don't understand how this could have happened," said Ervin, who added that the chain holding the bucket is inspected daily.

At the start of a shift, the bucket takes people down to the work area at the bottom of the shaft, Ervin said. The distance is comparable to a 40-story building.

The airshaft was being built as part of an expansion at the coal mine, which began production in July 2000.

The Bureau of Mines said Gibson County Coal had 280 employees last year and accounted for 68 of 103 mine accidents in the state last year.

Its last fatality was in November 2001, according to the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration. A miner died after being pinned by equipment, and operator error was cited as the cause.

Last year, MSHA cited the company for 353 safety violations — 127 of which were deemed "serious or significant," said Rodney Brown, a spokesman for the agency.

Brown said "serious or significant" citations are for viola-



Jondi Schmitt/Princeton Daily Clarion, via AP

Miners suited up at the Gibson County Coal construction site as they prepared to recover the bodies of three people who died there yesterday. The accident is under investigation.

tions that could imperil the safety of a mine's workers.

"It's the inspector's judgment that the violation, if left unchecked, would lead to a serious injury. In issuing our citations, that's basically an order to fix the problem," he said.

So far this year, the mine has faced 292 citations, 84 of which were considered serious and significant.

The state Bureau of Mines' Web site said parts of the Gibson County Coal mine were inspected June 11 and April 23. The inspector found several issues, but noted at the more recent review that the mine was "in good condition."

Underground mines in In-

diana are inspected quarterly by Don McCorkle, a labor department deputy commissioner and the Bureau of Mines' only employee.

This year, the General Assembly — anticipating expansions at several mines — allocated new money for the agency to hire a chief mine inspector to work under McCorkle. The position is being advertised, Noland said.

That action comes about two years after former Department of Labor Commissioner Miguel Rivera acknowledged the agency had stopped inspecting mines.

Rivera said then that state inspections were simply duplica-

tions of the ones already done by federal regulators and he wanted to focus resources in other areas, despite a state law requiring quarterly inspections. But last year — after the West Virginia accident that killed 12 miners — Rivera restarted the inspection program.

"The bureau is very active in not only going to different mines and inspecting them, but in putting on different training and getting mine rescue teams prepared," Keefer said yesterday.

The bureau's Web site lists regular inspections for the state's mines since that time.

The state had no mine fatalities in 2005 and 2006.

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