

COAL MINE EXPLOSION

Major safety lapses found long before blast

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — Federal inspectors found a string of safety violations at a sprawling West Virginia coal mine in the months and days leading up to an explosion that killed 25 this week, including two citations the day of the explosion. Miners were so concerned about the conditions that several told their congressman they were afraid to go back into the mine.

Records reviewed by The Associated Press paint a troubling picture of procedures at Massey Energy Co.'s Upper Big Branch mine, the site of Monday's explosion in the heart of West Virginia coal country. Safety advocates said the mine's track record, particularly a pair of January violations that produced two of the harshest fines in the mine's history, should have provoked stronger action by the mine operators and regulators.

In the January inspection, regulators found that dirty air was being directed into an escapeway where fresh air should be. They also found that an emergency air system was flowing in the wrong direction, which could leave workers without fresh air in their primary escape route.

Terry Moore, the mine foreman, told officials that he was aware of one of the problems and that it had been occurring for about three weeks.

"Mr. Moore engaged in aggravated conduct constituting more than ordinary negligence in that he was aware of the condition," the Mine Safety and Health Administration wrote in fining the company a combined \$130,000.

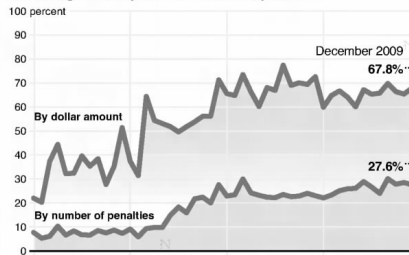
While records indicate those problems were fixed the same day, the mine's operator, Massey subsidiary Performance Coal Co., continued to rack up citations until the day of the blast. MSHA inspectors ticketed the mine Monday over inadequate maps of escape routes and an improper splice of electrical cable on a piece of equipment.

Trouble had been building at Upper Big Branch for a long time. Violations in 2009 were roughly double the amount from any previous year, and the January citation involving

Mines contesting more violations

Five years ago, mine operators nationwide contested less than eight percent of the federal safety violations they faced. That rate steadily climbed to around 30 percent of penalties last year, which translated to nearly 70 percent of the dollar value of fines.

Percentage of civil penalties contested, per month



SOURCE: Mine Safety and Health Administration

W. Va. miner talks about explosion

MOUNT HOPE, W.Va. (AP) — A West Virginia miner working underground when an explosion killed 25 colleagues saw the power go out, but only learned of the devastation when crews told him of flying debris.

"It started to sink in then," Melvin Lynch told The Associated Press on Wednesday. "We heard the lives were lost."

Lynch's brother, Roosevelt, died in the blast but Lynch's nephew, who also was in the mine, survived. Melvin Lynch was working far from the explosion and didn't hear or feel it. When the power went out, no one panicked because it had happened before.

Lynch said he was doing his best to cope.

"It's hard. It's a day-to-day thing. I'm just praying right now," he said.

Lynch said he has been working in the mines for more than 10 years and understands the risk.

"People walking down the street can get hurt," he said. "I don't know what else I would do — work for a utility company? Railroad? Other than that, I'd only find a mediocre job making less money."

Lynch said he wasn't mad at Massey Energy Co., which owns the Upper Big Branch mine where the blast occurred. "There's no reason to be mad at Massey in particular," he said. "There's not a coal mine in the world that you can go to and not find something wrong. It's the nature of the business and it's up to the men to make it safer."



ASSOCIATED PRESS

Judy Branham, employee at Country General store in Pettus, W.Va., embraces Patrick Hilbert of Eccles, W.Va., on Wednesday. The Performance Co. Coal miner's shift was set to start Monday just before the explosion at Massey Energy Co.'s Upper Big Branch mine.

Miners stunned, but return to work

Los Angeles Times

NAOMA, W.Va. — Bobby Gray was beat. He'd just worked the nine-hour overnight shift at a coal mine on Seng Creek on Wednesday, and he was due back at 4 p.m. But at least he was alive and safe.

"Thank God," said his wife Michelle. "I worry every time he goes down in that mine that he won't come home at the end of his shift."

Three days after an explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine killed 25 miners, dozens of other mines along the Big Coal River are still running, still sending men deep into the earth to scratch out a living.

The deaths of their friends and neighbors stunned other miners here, but it didn't keep them out of the mines. Coal families fear the mines and often resent mine operators, but they know what pays the bills.

"There's nothing else around here," said Gray, scratching his bare belly and

sucking on a Marlboro after napping between shifts. "If I didn't have this job, we'd be living in a trailer."

Gray, 38, a third-generation miner, worked at the Upper Big Branch mine before the operator, Massey Energy Co., transferred him to another Massey-owned mine. He earns \$28 an hour as a shuttle car operator.

"If he'd stayed, he'd have been with that crew that died," his wife said.

Gray shrugged. He said he had been glad to leave Upper Big Branch, which he called a "gassy mine."

"You could hear the methane coming up out of the ground. You could see it bubbling in the water," he said. "Everybody figured that sooner or later, that gas would be a killer."

The Grays know several of the miners listed as dead or unaccounted for at the Upper Big Branch mine. In the hollows and creek beds along Route 3, everybody has heard the stories of the missing and the dead.



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