

Survivor may be key to mine accident probe

Associated Press

MIDDLESBORO — The survivor of a coal mine roof collapse that killed three co-workers may provide important clues in the investigation of the cause of the nation's worst coal-mining accident in 2½ years, an official said Thursday.

Joey Lucas, a spokesman for the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration, said investigators probably would spend considerable time talking to Roger Wilder, 36, of Cabbage, who survived the accident Wednesday afternoon.

The other three members of his mining team were found dead after the collapse, which occurred about 2,400 feet inside Cumberland Valley Contractors Inc.'s No. 2 mine, about nine miles west of Middlesboro.

The last time more than one coal miner was killed on the job was July 9, 1986, when three miners died in a roof fall at the Orient No. 6 Mine near Waltonville, Ill., Lucas said.

"Making an exact determination on the cause and whether there were (safety) violations that contributed to it, all will be products of the investigation," Lucas said.

Wilder probably would be a focus of the investigation by officials of MSHA's District 5 office in Norton, Va., because the agency had received a report that he "had some indication the fall was coming," Lucas said.

A canopy over the continuous mining machine Wilder was operating protected him from the tons of rock and coal that fell inside the non-union mine, Lucas said.

"But it came so quickly the others were unable to retreat," Lucas said, describing the agency's initial information on the accident. He said the investigation would begin today but it was not known how long it would be before MSHA would issue a preliminary report.

The victims were identified as John S. Bradburn, 36, of Harrogate, Tenn.; Joseph E. Ditty, 32, of Harlan; and Tony L. Osborne, 31, of Tazewell, Tenn., said John Burleson, a mining company spokesman.

Rescue teams began digging toward the miners about 25 minutes after the accident, which occurred at 3:20 p.m. EST Wednesday, said Willard Stanley, commissioner of the

state Department of Mines and Minerals.

Bradburn's body was pulled from the mine about three hours later but the fate of the other two victims was not announced until about 10:30 p.m., shortly before Ditty's body was recovered. The rescuers did not bring Osborne's body to the surface until about noon Thursday.

"It was a tremendous blow because everyone in this company is a close-knit unit," Burleson said.

Ditty was the brother of the company president, Stanley Ditty, Burleson said. All of the dead miners had wives and children, he said.

"We're trying to make it as easy on the families as possible," Burleson said. "We're doing everything that's humanly possible."

Cumberland Valley Contractors employs 108 people and produced more than 1 million tons of coal last year, Burleson said. He said the victims were among 12 people who work on one shift at the mine. The accident occurred during the final hour before the miners were scheduled to leave work, Burleson said.

Virginia coal deaths rise

Associated Press

Virginia recorded five coal mining fatalities in 1988, up from three a year earlier, but state officials said Thursday the improved safety training that was started four years ago appears to be working.

Meanwhile, a federal mining official said Thursday that 52 miners were killed nationwide in 1988, breaking the previous record low number of 63 set a year earlier.

"This is our second lowest year on record, in terms of coal-mining deaths," said Mike Abbott, a spokesman with the Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy. "We had five fatalities in '88. Three were in roof falls. Two were in machine-related accidents."

All of the Virginia fatalities occurred in Buchanan County, which Abbott said was coincidental since state and federal safety

standards are the same in all of Virginia's seven coal counties.

The victims included Billy Mullins, 21, of Iaeger, W.Va., killed March 26 in a roof fall at Solid Mining Co.; Ricky Lynn Rose, 27, of Jewell Ridge, killed April 14 in a roof fall at Chaparal Coal Co.; and Dow Rose, 46, of Clinchco, killed June 22 in a machinery accident at linchfield Coal Co.'s Splashdam Mine.

Also killed were Jerry Stiltner, 44, of Harman, who died Sept. 12 in a machine accident at Harman Mining Corp.; and Johnny D. Johnson, 27, of Grundy, killed Sept. 26 in a roof fall.

Mining fatalities have been on the decrease as safety awareness has risen and technology improved.

"It's safe to say the single-digit numbers were not recognized until the '80s," Abbott said.

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