

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2007

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PENNYRILE PLUS

National Mine Rescue Contest



Fifty-seven mine rescue teams from 12 states competed in the National Mine Rescue Contest at Nashville's Opryland Hotel recently. The Warrior Coal, LLC team placed third in the combination event, which includes both mine rescue and first aid. The mine rescue team finished sixth among the 57 teams that competed and the first aid team finished first among the Kentucky teams competing at the Nationals.

Pictured, at top, from left, are Kevin Vaughn - Mine Rescue Captain, James Menser, Rick Ashby, Jerry Hedgepath, Bryan Branson, Joel Bradley, Barry Rickard, Marcus Arnold, Mike Burnette - First Aid Captain. Pictured, at left, from left, are Bryan Branson, Mike Burnette, Marcus Arnold, Johnny Green - executive director of the Kentucky Office of Mine Safety and Licensing. (Photos provided)

2007 National Mine Rescue Contest NEWS

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Labor Secretary says Bush is committed to mine safety

■ Chao spoke to miners conference in Nashville.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NASHVILLE — U.S. Labor Secretary Elaine Chao said Wednesday that the Bush administration is committed to improving safety for miners under legislation passed last year after a string of fatal mining accidents.

Chao did not discuss any specific safety issues related to the recent Utah mine collapse, where rescuers were drilling a seventh hole deep into a mountain to learn the fate of six miners trapped since Aug. 6.

"Our hearts and prayers go out to the families of the miners in Crandall Canyon," she told the International Mine Rescue Conference in Nashville.

"We also remember the families of the mine rescuers, three of whom lost their lives, and six others who were injured in the rescue effort."

Chao did not take any questions and left quickly after the speech. The head of the Mine Safety and Health Administration, Richard Stickler, was scheduled to speak, but Chao said he was in Utah.

Chao said many safety improvements, such as requiring additional stores of oxygen and better tracking equipment, have already been ordered under the mine safety bill signed by the president last June after explosions at West Virginia's Sago and Kentucky's Darby mines left 17 miners dead.

"The (Labor) Department will continue to implement the MINER Act on time and according to the schedule that Congress has set," she said.



The Associated Press

Members of rescue team No. 1 from Energy West Mining of Huntington, Utah, check out their equipment as they compete in the National Mine Rescue Contest in Nashville on Wednesday.

The MINER Act of 2006 required that all mines have MSHA-approved emergency response plans in place. The plans also dictate where extra breathable air should be stored in case of an accident.

Although most of the plan for Crandall Canyon was in place by June 13, MSHA gave the mine operators until August 12 — six days after the accident — to meet the breathable air requirement.

Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., is pressuring Chao to make sure all mines have adequate emergency response plans and are fully implemented.

In a letter last week, he asked her to give him a detailed list showing which mines have approved plans and whether each mine has fully complied.

Attendees at the conference, as well as the National Mine Rescue

Competition being held at the same location, spoke of the need for better communications that will work deep below ground.

Bruce Watzman, vice president of the National Mining Association, which represents mine operators, urged policy makers to be patient and wait for the results of the investigation into the Utah mine disaster before developing new regulations.

"We need to get it right," he said. "We need to know the facts."

Watzman said he thought the current requirement for quarterly mine inspections was sufficient, adding that for a big mine one inspection can last an entire three months.

"There are mines in this country where you have a federal inspector underground every day that mine is operating," he said.

Mine union blasts proposed federal rescue rule

By Tim Huber
The Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — The United Mine Workers has panned a proposed federal rule designed to improve rescue operations at the nation's 653 underground coal mines, in part by cutting maximum emergency response times in half.

"The union does not believe the proposed rule should move forward as it is written," Dennis O'Dell, administrator of Occupational Health and Safety, told a federal Mine Safety and Health Administration panel Tuesday. MSHA either misunderstood or ignored Congress when it crafted the mine rescue rule, said O'Dell, who suggested tabling the proposal and rewriting it after talking with the union, mine operators and lawmakers.

The rule is aimed at comply-

ing with a federal law passed last year after an explosion that killed 12 West Virginia miners and several other high-profile fatal accidents.

The proposal would require rescuers to reach underground coal mines within one hour. The current rule is two hours.

Rescue teams also would have to be certified, familiar with a mine's workings and participate in two local mine rescue contests annually. Members would need at least three years of underground experience and 64 hours of training a year. The current requirement is 40 hours per year.

O'Dell, however, said Congress mandated rescue teams at every underground coal mine, not just two employees from each mine serving on rescue teams as proposed by MSHA.

"They should be employed

at that mine," O'Dell said in an interview with The Associated Press.

O'Dell and others from the coal industry also raised questions about the amount and type of training required by the rule. O'Dell told the panel that rescue teams should be required to practice at mines they are assigned to serve, though he said the union has not decided how often that should occur.

Ken Perdue, from Abingdon, Va.-based mine operator Alpha Natural Resources, said the rule is going to cost his company \$530,000, much of it to relocate one mine rescue station. He said MSHA's estimate that the rule would cost the industry \$3.1 million a year is too low.

Perdue added that the rule may eliminate mine rescue teams rather than increase

their ranks because it would break up existing units and add so much training time that members would quit.

"It will take years and millions of dollars for us to overcome" the changes, Perdue said.

Pennsylvania Bureau of Mine Safety official Jeffrey Stanchek said the state will have to spend \$800,000 on a new mine rescue station and another \$150,000 a year to operate it. And Stanchek told the panel that rescue team training requirements could add up to significantly more costs, though he didn't provide a figure.

At a second hearing Tuesday afternoon on proposed rules requiring additional oxygen supplies and other equipment in all the nation's mines regardless of whether they mine coal, Stanchek asked whether the state would have

to buy two gas detectors for each mine rescue team or if teams could share devices. "Once again we're doubling our money," he said.

MSHA Office of Standards, Regulations and Variances Director Patricia Silvey told Stanchek the agency will address his question in the final rule. "I think we will do it satisfactorily," she said.

Interest in emergency response was spurred by the January 2006 deadly explosion at West Virginia's Sago Mine and was renewed after this past summer's death of six miners and three rescue workers at the Crandall Canyon mine in Utah.

Tuesday's hearings were the third of four sessions on the proposals. MSHA has held similar meetings in Salt Lake City and Lexington, Ky. A final session is scheduled for Thursday in Birmingham.

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