

The high price of coal

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Murray Energy Corp.'s Galatia coal mine in Southern Illinois has a long and troubling history of safety violations: 2,787 of them since 2005; 999 in the first six months of 2007 alone. Murray is the same company that owns the Crandall Canyon mine in Utah, where six miners were trapped and presumably killed in a collapse on Aug. 6. Last week, two would-be rescuers and a safety inspector died there as well.

Murray's Galatia mine is Illinois' largest. Of all the major fines levied nationwide by federal mine safety officials in the first half of 2007, about 25 percent were against Galatia. So far this year, regulators have called for \$1.5 million in fines for the facility. That's roughly triple the amount for all of last year, before the federal penalty amounts were increased by the first new mine safety law in nearly three decades.

Among the 216 serious safety violations for which it has been cited this year are 27 so-called unwarranted failures; these indicate problems that the mine operator failed to fix even after being warned about them.

At a public hearing in St. Louis last year conducted by the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration, the Galatia official in charge of health and safety opposed stiffer penalties. Fines "are not an incentive for safety, nor do they have any positive effect on our or any other operator's safety efforts," said the company's Paul Kraus.

Serious questions remain about whether the new law goes far enough and about the Bush administration's commitment to safety and the enforcement of the law.

The collapse of the Crandall Canyon mine is yet another painful case-in-point. The federal Mine Safety and Health Administration approved the use there of a risky technique called retreat mining, even though the mine shaft was about 2,000 feet deep and the walls and ceiling were under tremendous loads.

In the aftermath, MSHA also allowed owner Robert Murray to monopolize press conferences and contradict federal experts, even though the MSHA is supposed to be the primary source of information in a mine disaster. With MSHA director Richard Stickler elsewhere at the disaster site, Murray took reporters and victims' families into the collapsed mine in apparent violation of federal safety rules. Seismic activity brought an end to that excursion and, a few days later, to the lives of the two would-be rescuers and the inspector.

Last year's deadly Sago Mine collapse in West Virginia was supposed to have resulted in more stringent safety procedures. But mining companies in America still do not have to provide their miners with wireless communications equipment that would permit rescuers to communicate with them in emergencies. They still are not required to install reinforced safety cages of the type that saved the lives of 72 Canadian miners last

year.

Fines for serious safety violations still are routinely reduced after the fact as a result of mine company appeals. And although the number of coal mines has increased in recent years, the number of hours that inspectors devote to each mine has fallen.

Coal mining is an inherently dangerous occupation. But inadequate safeguards, weakened penalties and poor oversight leave it more dangerous than it could be.

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