

MSHA Steps Up Metal/Non-Metal Mine Enforcement and Focuses on Workplace Examinations as Winter Approaches

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Citing an increase in the number of fatalities at non-coal mines and the coming of cooler weather, the Mine Safety and Health Administration has announced a stepped-up enforcement to combat hazards and fatality risks.

In an October 5 news release announcing its fatality prevention effort, MSHA said that, since 2000, 51 Metal/Non-Metal (M/NM) miners have lost their lives during October. More than a quarter of those October deaths, 14, occurred during the winter of 2013-2014. According to the agency, most of the fatalities involved machinery or powered haulage, the latter a catch-all term that MSHA applies to accidents involving both mobile equipment and conveyors.

“This is the time to be proactive,” urged MSHA Assistant Secretary Joe Main. “Conduct workplace examinations to identify and fix hazards. Properly train miners so that they can recognize and avoid dangerous conditions and return home at the end of their shift.”

The agency suggested that the increased risk occurs because miners are conducting non-routine tasks in preparation for winter. For instance, many intermittent M/NM operations perform annual shutdown activities, including disassembling portable plants. At the same time, full-time operations are busy relocating equipment into storage and conducting annual repairs.

“During seasonal transition, miners may engage in new or unfamiliar tasks, working with equipment they service only once a year, or assisting maintenance personnel on jobs they rarely perform,” MSHA said.

MSHA has increased its enforcement staff and boosted impact inspections. In September, MSHA impact inspection teams visited seven M/NM mines, four in response to fatalities, and issued 193 citations and 13 orders. MSHA claims that it targets mines and mine operators for impact inspections after fatalities and for a host of other reasons. For example, MSHA targets operations for impact inspections if MSHA perceives the mine has compliance problems, an excess of hazard complaints, accident or injury rates that are higher than average, “operational changes” at the mine, and for what MSHA calls “operator tactics.”

“MSHA’s heightened vigilance” can be addressed with renewed company planning and training

and to refresh employees and supervisors on dealing with MSHA and responding to agency requests without admissions. “We have repeatedly seen the benefits of site training on responding to MSHA questions and document requests, and we encourage refresher training at least yearly to remind personnel that MSHA aim is enforcement, no matter how friendly the inspectors,” Henry Chajet said.

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