

# News Release



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## **MSHA issues guidelines for industry compliance with ventilation regulations**

**ARLINGTON, Va.** – As a result of troubling testimony heard in a recent field hearing regarding the explosion of Massey Energy’s Upper Big Branch mine, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration today announced the release of four new program information bulletins pertaining to ventilation issues in underground coal mines. The purpose of these PIBs is to remind mine operators, miners’ representatives, MSHA enforcement personnel and other interested parties about mandatory coal mine safety standards relative to inadequate ventilation, intentional changes in the mine’s ventilation system, maintaining face ventilation control devices, and maintaining methane monitors in permissible and proper operating condition for mining equipment.

MSHA decided to distribute this alert based on testimony delivered during a House Education and Labor Committee hearing in Beckley, W.Va., in May that raised serious questions as to whether or not the Upper Big Branch mine was properly following ventilation standards prior to the explosion on April 5. The testimony from family members of miners who died in the April 5 explosion at Upper Big Branch mine indicated that concerns over safety conditions existed at the mine prior to the deadly blast.

“This announcement serves to remind all mine operators of their obligation to comply with all federal regulations to ensure the health and safety of their employees,” said Joseph A. Main, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health. “Failure to follow the ventilation standards can lead to illness, injury and death. These standards are not voluntary, and every mine operator in the country is on notice that MSHA will not tolerate violations of ventilation standards.”

In addition to reminding mine operators of their obligations under the law, Main noted that MSHA inspectors are being instructed to enhance enforcement efforts relating to violations of ventilation standards. “Mine inspectors are being instructed to beef up enforcement of ventilation standards,” he added.

Providing adequate ventilation in an underground mine is the principal means of ensuring that flammable, explosive, noxious and harmful gases, dusts, smoke and fumes are continuously diluted, rendered harmless and carried away. Insufficient air quantity allows methane and dust to accumulate, potentially resulting in a mine fire or explosion. Dust accumulations can also cause miners to be exposed to harmful levels of respirable dust, which can lead to black lung.

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The guidance covers intentional changes to a mine's ventilation system and working face ventilation controls, and reiterates the prohibition on tampering with methane monitors. The guidance reminds operators of their obligations under current law.

Intentional changes to the mine's ventilation system include adding a new shaft, bringing a new fan on line, changing the direction of air in an air course, changing the direction of air in a bleeder system and shutting down one fan in a multiple fan system. Any intentional change to the ventilation system that alters the main air current or any split of the main air current in a manner that could materially affect the safety and health of miners must be approved by MSHA before it is implemented.

Face ventilation controls are a critical feature for providing underground coal miners with reliable ventilation. Failure to maintain controls or make prompt repairs to restore ventilation places miners' safety and health at risk due to an increased chance of a methane ignition and elevated respirable dust. Moreover, most miners on a working section do not have a means of measuring air quantities. They can, however, determine when ventilation controls are likely to adversely affect the air quantity.

Methane monitors on mining equipment must be maintained in permissible and proper operating condition. Their effectiveness, however, can be defeated in a number of ways, either by placing material over the sensor head of the monitor or "bridging out" the electrical safety components of the monitors. Placing material over the sensor head will prevent the monitor from detecting excessive and dangerous concentrations of methane in the mine. Similarly, "bridging out" the electrical components of the monitors will prevent the mining equipment from shutting down when methane reaches the two percent cut-off level. MSHA does not tolerate bridging out or tampering with methane monitors.

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