



U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations

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U.S. Senate Appropriations Labor, HHS, Education Subcommittee Testimony of Bruce Watzman of the National Mining Association

WASHINGTON, D.C. . The U.S. Senate Appropriations Labor, Health and Human Service, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee on Wednesday held a hearing to assess mine safety progress one year since the deadly coal mine tragedies in West Virginia at the Sago and Alma mines. As part of that hearing, the subcommittee heard testimony from Mr. Bruce Watzman, Vice President of safety, health and human resources for the National Mining Association. Mr. Watzman's prepared testimony is below.

NMA and its member companies appreciate the opportunity to discuss with the subcommittee what we have done since the tragic events last year in West Virginia and Kentucky and since passage of the Mine Improvement and New Emergency Response (MINER) Act of 2006, which NMA supported.

Last year's events brought all members of the mining community together behind a single purpose . to ensure that every miner returns home safely to their loved ones each and every day. It is this single purpose that has guided the actions of NMA in establishing the Mine Safety Technology and Training Commission, supporting passage of the MINER Act, promoting industry awareness of the law's new requirements, and striving to find and deploy the new technologies which will improve the protection of underground coal miners.

With that common purpose in mind, I will discuss with you today the findings of the Mine Safety Technology and Training Commission, and what the industry is doing to implement its recommendations; steps the industry has taken thus far to meet the expectations of the MINER Act; and our views on enhancing mine safety research capabilities.

Mine Safety Technology and Training Commission

In January 2006, NMA established the Mine Safety Technology and Training Commission, an independent body, to immediately undertake a study of new technologies, procedures and training techniques that can further enhance safety in the nation's underground coal mines. The commission drew upon the knowledge and experience of mine safety and health professionals from academia, government,

industry and the United Mine Workers of America to develop a pro-active blueprint for achieving zero fatalities and zero serious injuries in U.S. underground coal mines. The product of the commission's deliberations is a peer-reviewed report released in December 2006. Mr. Chairman I would ask that the commission's complete report be made a part of this hearing record.

The commission unanimously adopted 75 recommendations that are both near-term and far-reaching in scope. Many of the recommendations endorse actions taken by Congress in passing the MINER Act. The commission's recommendations include the areas of communications technology, emergency preparedness, response and rescue procedures, training, and escape and protection strategies. The central theme of the commission's recommendations is a call for a new paradigm for ensuring mine safety . one that focuses on a systematic and comprehensive risk assessment-based approach toward prevention that serves as the foundation from which all safety efforts will flow. This new paradigm will require us to look at mining differently and to train miners differently.

The industry is currently implementing a number of the commission's near-term recommendations and is developing a blueprint for action on the more far-reaching items. For example, we are discussing with NIOSH the development of risk-based management tools and templates to assist the industry in its implementation of the central recommendation of the commission. The use of risk-analysis risk-management, while not a common practice throughout the industry, is familiar to many of the larger companies. Our goal is to create operational tools that will help every company identify and address significant hazards before they create situations that threaten life or property.

We share the commission's view that adoption of a comprehensive, risk assessment-based approach toward prevention should significantly increase the odds of survival for miners in emergency situations, [and] also provide a guideline for pursuing zero accidents from all sources.+ We are mindful, however, that this is a significant undertaking. As Professor Jim Joy, Minerals Industry Health and Safety Center, University of Queensland, has noted in describing the Australian mining industry's experience with implementation of a risk-based approach, [It] is immense and fraught with stumbling blocks.+ Nonetheless, we are committed to the task.

MINER Act

NMA worked toward the passage of the MINER Act. We continue to believe that its core requirements are sound. The requirements, as implemented through Emergency Response Plans, recognize the need for a forward-looking risk assessment, that good safety practices continually evolve based upon experience and technological development, and that every underground coal mine presents a unique environment and what may work in one may not be effective or desirable in another. As the Act's legislative history succinctly states:

The goals of optimizing safety and survivability must be unchanging, but the manner for doing so must be practical and sensible.

S. Rep. No. 109-365 p. 3.

We believe that this passage not only aptly captures the intent of the law, but also serves as a useful reminder to the industry and regulators that there is often more than one way to achieve our singular purpose to improve workplace safety.

In the months following the enactment of the MINER Act, we endeavored to promote industry awareness and understanding of the law's new requirements. Toward that end, NMA, in conjunction with its state association affiliates, and in cooperation with federal and state mine safety agencies, conducted six MINER Act Workshops throughout the country. These workshops were designed to assist the industry in preparing their Emergency Response Plans, obtain information on the latest technological developments for communications and tracking systems, and assess mine rescue protocols.

Even before the enactment of the MINER Act, NMA and its members engaged NIOSH and MSHA in a mine emergency communications partnership. The purpose of the partnership is to evaluate current practices and technologies, design performance criteria and protocols for testing, and identify mines where the technologies can be tested. Our members have volunteered their mines for testing tracking and communications systems. Some of these technologies hold great promise; however, they are, in our estimation, some years away from readiness for mine application. Communications and safety experts agree that underground coal mines present unique challenges to radio and wire signal propagation. What works in one mine may not perform in another. As we seek to find and deploy the best systems, we will continue in the meantime to improve conventional systems to provide more reliable means for tracking and communicating with miners underground.

Another challenge we face is the often conflicting regulatory requirements imposed by MSHA and state governments. We do not have the luxury of time to develop one system that complies with MSHA requirements, another for one state and possibly a third or fourth for additional states. Unfortunately, the underground mining marketplace is not attractive to many technology providers. In the interest of miner safety it is imperative that we embrace policies that encourage the broadest possible application of technology across all underground coal regions.

While we grapple with the technological challenges in these areas, the industry continues to move forward in making substantial investments in safety equipment and practices to meet the expectations of the MINER Act. The preliminary data from a survey of NMA members (to date the survey responses represent about 65 percent of all underground coal production) indicates actual and planned investments in the following areas for 2006-2007:

- \$65 million to purchase 90,000 additional self-contained self-rescuers (SCSRs).
- \$19 million in communication and tracking systems.
- \$15 million for additional measures required under new state requirements.
- \$60 million for safety equipment, training, and manpower beyond the mandates of the MINER Act.

These numbers simply reflect one quantifiable measurement of the industry's commitment to the MINER Act. And it is only the beginning, just as the MINER Act itself is not the end, but rather one means for reaching our desired goal to protect our nation's miners.

Beyond the actions taken by the industry to comply with federal and state rules we have undertaken several voluntary initiatives that we would like to bring to your attention.

NMA, with the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), initiated a review of existing mine rescue procedures to determine if existing practices and protocols remain operative given the structural changes that have occurred across the industry. This effort resulted in the development of a generic mine rescue handbook that can serve as a guide for those forming mine rescue teams and developing mine rescue protocols, as well as a review tool for those with established procedures in place. This document has been distributed throughout the mining industry to be used as a pre-event planning template that will expedite the delivery of mine rescue services in an efficient manner, should they be required. It is also readily available to the industry and public on NMA's website at www.nma.org. With the chairman's permission, I would ask that a copy of the handbook be included in the record.

Working with the industry's communication specialists, NMA is developing a protocol for communications with the media during a mining crisis. The protocol recognizes the important role of the media in keeping communities informed about the facts surrounding a mining accident or fatality and the obligation of mine operators to contribute to that understanding. The protocol will provide a framework for effective communications and cooperation with MSHA, as envisioned by the MINER Act.

Mine Safety Research

At no time in our recent history has the expertise residing at the mining program in NIOSH been more vital to improving mine safety. The elimination of the Bureau of Mines in 1995 was a blow to the longstanding and renowned government leadership in mine safety and health research. The permanent establishment through the MINER Act of the Office of Mine Safety and Health in NIOSH will begin to restore this important function to its former prominence. However, without adequate resources, the Office of

Mine Safety and Health's leadership in this area will suffer and the MINER Act's expectation for the acceleration in the pace of research and progress will be frustrated.

While NIOSH continues to develop and implement important advancements in mine safety and health, progress has slowed due to the erosion of research funds, and the situation is becoming critical. Because NIOSH's budget for mine safety and health has remained relatively flat in recent years, its purchasing power continues to decline with the increasing cost of labor, materials and other research costs.

This subcommittee's efforts and Senator Byrd's leadership last year provided NIOSH with \$10 million through the Emergency Supplemental Appropriation of 2006 to facilitate the development of technologies for rapid introduction into underground coal mines. The decisions on which technologies should be supported with that funding were made in collaboration with labor and industry under the auspices of the many NIOSH partnerships that have been formed.

We urge you to again strengthen this vital government function and ensure funding for NIOSH is commensurate with the role Congress intended under the MINER Act to, enhance the development of new miner safety technology and technological applications and to expedite the commercial availability and implementation of such technology in mining environments. +

Today's mine safety and health professionals face important challenges. More complicated geological conditions, advancements in technology and a new generation of miners require the introduction of new and innovative techniques. Our ability to further advance coal mine safety will require that government and industry continue to harness their collective resources to identify new technologies and practices that eliminate accidents, illnesses and injuries in the workplace. We look forward to working with you to ensure that the resources required to achieve this goal are available so that every miner can return home safely each and every day.

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