

# Second West Virginia Mine Accident Kills Two

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Staff Writer

In less than three weeks, West Virginia experienced another fatal coal mine accident, bringing the number of West Virginia miners killed in January to fourteen. Aracoma Coal's Alma No. 1 Mine, located in Melville, West Virginia, was the site of the latest accident, which was the result of a conveyor belt fire on Thursday, January 19. Killed were Don I. Bragg, 33, and Ellery Hatfield, 47. Twenty-one miners were inside the mine at the time of the fire. Bragg and Hatfield reportedly became separated from their twelve-member crew while trying to escape the blaze. The rest of their crew—along with nine other miners who were working in a different section of the mine—escaped unharmed. Although the two miners both had oxygen devices, current devices only contain enough oxygen for one hour. Bragg's and Hatfield's bodies were found on Saturday, January 21 near where the fire broke out.

Rescue teams from four states responded to the accident; they could not enter the mine until the fire had been mostly extinguished and the tunnels had cooled down. Their rescue efforts also were impeded by the collapse of the mine's roof, blocked entryways, and smoke which significantly reduced visibility.

A report on CNN.com stated that the fire broke out on Thursday around 5:45 pm,

but that firefighters were not notified until around 8:00 pm. Firefighters arrived within four minutes of being notified but, according to Logan County Fire Chief Scott Beckett, whose crew was the first to arrive, they were not allowed to enter the mine until rescue teams arrived, which was around 11:30 pm. Beckett was told that his crew could be arrested if they entered the mine. Officials with the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) state that federal regulations prohibit those without mine safety training from entering a mine in an emergency situation. Responders to mine accidents are required to take a forty-hour course, followed by periodic twenty-hour refresher courses. They also must have one to five years mining experience. Fire Chief Beckett noted that at least six of his men are miners and had the proper training. He referred to the situation as being "frustrating." Officials with Aracoma Coal, which is owned by Massey Energy of Richmond, Virginia, had no comment.

Current mine safety laws have not changed for nearly thirty years; labor leaders and regulators are calling for reformations. The original mine safety laws were enacted in 1969 after seventy-eight miners were killed in a West Virginia mine explosion. The last major changes occurred in 1977—a few years after ninety-one miners were killed in a fire in Idaho. The MSHA wants to impose

\$220,000 fines for serious violations; the current maximum fine is \$60,000. The first congressional hearing regarding mine safety was held on January 23 with subsequent meetings being held January 31 and in March. Dennis O'Dell, United Mine Workers head of Safety and Health, said that the union is asking the government to require:

- Sturdier communications equipment that will withstand an explosion
- Rescue teams stationed at every mine
- Breathing apparatus that will give miners hours of oxygen

West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin proposed legislation on Monday, January 23 that he said he hopes will improve miners' chances for survival in case of an accident. His legislation proposed:

- Use of electronic tracking devices on miners
- Oxygen stations throughout mines
- Fining mine companies \$100,000 if they don't call an emergency hotline within fifteen minutes of certain accidents

"There is not a miner that works underground that should ever suffocate," Manchin said. "Time, hours, days go by—that's unacceptable. West Virginia...will begin to be one of the safest states in the nation for miners."

West Virginia lawmakers passed the bill the same day.

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