

Closed Silver Mine to Start Rehiring in July

NICHOLAS K. GERANIOS, Associated Press

WALLACE, Idaho (AP) — A northern Idaho silver mine that was shut down after a series of accidents last year, including the deaths of two miners, will start rehiring in July and should have a full workforce by the end of the year, Hecla Mining Co. Chief Executive Officer Phil Baker said Thursday.

The underground Lucky Friday Mine — one of the nation's deepest — was ordered closed in January for safety improvements.

Baker said the work should be finished by year's end, allowing the mine to resume production. More than 110 of the mine's 250 workers were laid off when it closed.

"We expect all of our positions to be filled by the end of the year," Baker said.

Baker also said at Hecla's annual shareholders meeting that the company is studying the reopening of the closed Star Morning Mine in Idaho's Silver Valley, which would greatly increase employment and silver production. That mine was closed in 1990. High silver prices have prompted companies to look at reopening several closed mines in the region.

Wallace Mayor Dick Vester said Hecla's actions could greatly benefit the community, which has long suffered from high unemployment.

"These are some encouraging signs for the future," Vester said.

The temporary closure of the Lucky Friday has hurt families and businesses in the area, he said.

Hecla is the nation's largest primary silver producer.

Federal safety inspectors ordered the Lucky Friday Mine closed after they determined sand and concrete material that had leaked from a pipe into a mine shaft over the years needed to be removed.

The material is in the mile-deep Silver Shaft, the mine's main access shaft, and workers are essentially power washing the material from its walls.

The closure prompted Hecla to reduce its estimated silver production for 2012 from more than 9 million ounces to about 7 million ounces, all from its remaining Green's Creek mine in Alaska.

Lucky Friday miners average about \$100,000 per year in pay and benefits in a depressed region where there are few other job options.

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The mine had been shuttered since mid-December, when a rock burst injured seven miners. The burst was the latest in a string of accidents at the mine, which is about 50 miles east of Coeur d'Alene, where the company is based.

In the fatal accidents, contract miner Brandon Lloyd Gray, 26, was buried in rubble while trying to dislodge jammed rock on Nov. 17, and died two days later. On April 15, miner Larry "Pete" Marek was crushed when his work area collapsed. Federal inspectors found company safety failures led to Marek's death.

Before last year, the mine had gone 25 years without a fatality.

The two dead miners were remembered before Thursday's meeting.

"This has hit Hecla very hard," Baker said. "We are determined not to let it happen again."

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