Three Chosen to Examine U.S. Mine Safety Improvements

JOHN RABY,Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — Three experts on mine and workplace safety and health were named Monday to research ways to make U.S. coal mines safer as part of Alpha Natural Resources Inc.'s settlement with the federal government following the nation's worst mine disaster in 40 years.

The independent panel selected by Alpha and approved by the U.S. attorney's office for West Virginia's southern district includes mining engineering professors Michael Karmis of Virginia Tech and Keith Heasley of West Virginia University, and Dr. David Wegman, a professor emeritus of work environment at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell.

The panel will operate as the nonprofit Alpha Foundation for the Improvement of Mine Safety and Health Inc. It will spearhead mine safety and health research and development without involvement from Alpha or the U.S. attorney's office.

Heasley's research interests include numerical modeling, computer applications in mining, multiple-seam mine design and ground control. Last year he received a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to develop a seismic system for locating trapped miners.

Karmis' work at Virginia Tech has included several projects in health and safety, communications and tracking systems.

Wegman, an epidemiologist, is recognized for his expertise in occupational health and safety and has published more than 200 research articles.

Funding priorities will be set starting this summer. Karmis said other industry experts will be among those brought in for discussions. After careful development of ideas, projects would be solicited in the academic and nonprofit fields, and proposals received could be sent to outside experts for their review.

"We don't want to be criticized that we're funding research that someone else is (doing)," Karmis said. "We don't want to duplicate. We want really to charter some new waters. We want to encourage proposals looking forward to solving real problems."

The $210 million settlement announced in December with the U.S. Department of Justice stemming from the 2010 Upper Big Branch disaster that killed 29 men was the biggest ever reached in a U.S. mining disaster. Under the settlement, Virginia-based Alpha will invest $48 million in the foundation and spend an additional $80 million to improve safety at all of its mines with the latest technology.

"This presents a tremendous opportunity to drive the latest developments and innovation in mine safety and health to the benefit of miners around the world," Alpha CEO Kevin Crutchfield said.

U.S. Attorney Booth Goodwin said the research and development component "holds the promise of breakthroughs that will transform mine safety in the coming decades."

He said the foundation "will jump-start innovation and put brilliant minds to work on the risks that coal miners face. We look forward to a future in which coal mining is as safe as any other occupation."

In 2011, there were 21 deaths from U.S. coal mining accidents, the second lowest annual count since the federal government began keeping records more than a century ago. U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration chief Joe Main has said stepped up federal safety enforcement helped the industry rebound from 2010 when 48 miners were killed nationwide.

The settlement also calls for $46.5 million in restitution for miners' families and $35 million in fines for safety violations at Upper Big Branch and other mines run by previous owner Massey Energy, which was bought by Alpha last year.

In January, attorneys for the families of the 29 killed announced they had settled their wrongful death lawsuits with Alpha, and Alpha has settled lawsuits with at least seven injured miners. Nine other survivors want to abandon mediation of their personal injury claims and start gathering evidence for trial.

Investigations have determined that Massey allowed highly explosive methane gas and coal dust to accumulate at Upper Big Branch, and that worn and broken cutting equipment created the spark that ignited the fuel. Broken and clogged water sprayers allowed a mere flare-up to turn into an inferno that ripped through miles of underground tunnels and killed men instantly.