Report: Inspections at Harlan Mine Were Lax

the Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — A published report says state investigators found few problems at a Harlan County mine where federal investigators found enough violations during a surprise safety blitz in May to shut the facility down for nine days.

The Courier-Journal (http://cjky.it/Mb5y54 [1]) reports an analysis it did shows that state inspectors reviewed conditions at the mine 30 times in more than two years.

After the federal blitz, however, the state did a surprise inspection at K & D Mining Inc.'s Mine No. 17 in Highsplint and found 37 violations. According to records obtained through the Kentucky Open Records Act, officials found more violations during that one inspection than did five earlier inspections in 2012 and about 24 inspections in 2010 and 2011.

Meanwhile, federal inspectors have issued about 400 citations to the mine since 2010.

Office of Mine Safety and Licensing Director Freddie Lewis said previous inspections should have been more vigorous, and the agency will be more vigilant. He said an inspector has been reprimanded for failing to report hazards at the mine

"Everybody should have done a better job, I'm sure," said Lewis, who was appointed in March. "We have a lot of really good employees here. Their hearts are in it ... but every once in a while, it's easy to get complacent on any job."

. The state's surprise inspection, which came after The Courier-Journal reported on the federal blitz, found excessive loose coal, an unsupported mine roof, electrical problems and a nonworking fire suppression system, according to documents.

"There's no excuse for it," Lewis said of the violations.

Records show Ralph Napier, John D. North and Jack H. Ealy ran the mine. Napier and North had formerly operated Kentucky Darby Mine No. 1 in Harlan County, where five miners were killed in a 2006 blast.

Two weeks after the state cited the mine, the operators closed it, laying off about 40 workers.

An attorney for the company operators did not return a call from the newspaper seeking comment.

Lewis said he met with inspectors two weeks ago and reiterated that he wouldn't tolerate cutting corners.

"We get paid to do a job, to ensure that coal miners go home at the end of every shift, and I expect no less from you when you put a hard hat on," Lewis said he told the inspectors. "I don't know what the past practice has been, how they handled these situations . but if it is against the law, you put it on paper, bottom line."

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Information from: The Courier-Journal, http://www.courier-journal.com *[2]*

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