Report: Give Miners Better Escape Training, Tools

Vicki Smith, Associated Press

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. (AP) — Federal regulators and safety officials should consider requiring more backup air supplies and work to develop better breathing devices that would help the nation's coal miners escape underground emergencies, a panel of experts said in a report released Thursday.

The report from the National Research Council makes seven wide-ranging recommendations to two agencies — the Mine Safety and Health Administration and the National Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Among other things, it urges better technology, including systems for communicating with people on the surface, real-time gas monitors and fail-safe tracking devices.

The independent, nonprofit National Research Council is the main operating agency of the National Academy of Sciences. The report was authored by a nine-member committee of experts with universities, the private sector, NASA and the United Mine Workers of America.

The report doesn't propose new laws or regulations, instead focusing on ways to better equip the nation's 50,000 underground miners to save themselves from potential disasters.

Few will ever have to evacuate, the nine-member committee on mine safety wrote. But when they do, the response must be automatic — the result of deeply ingrained training that prevents hesitation, confusion or bad decision-making.

MSHA didn't immediately comment on the report, which grew in part from several West Virginia mine disasters.

In 2006, 12 men died after an explosion trapped them at International Coal Group's Sago Mine. Randal McCloy, the only miner to survive the 40-hour wait for a rescue in poisoned air, later told investigators that several air packs his crew had been carrying failed.

Last year, MSHA ordered mine operators to begin phasing out that model of "self-contained self-rescuer," the SR-100, after it proved unreliable in tests. All of the estimated 66,000 potentially defective air packs must be out of U.S. mines by the end of this year, and CSE Corp. of Monroeville, Pa., no longer manufactures that model.

Many of air packs were stored in the emergency caches required under a federal law passed after Sago.

Mine operators are supposed to supply at least two hours of emergency air per miner and stash more air packs in escapeways. No miner should have to walk

more than 30 minutes to reach one, and they are to be available in regular intervals the whole way to the surface.

Scrutiny of both industry and regulators has increased since Sago, the report says more must be done. The Upper Big Branch mine explosion, which killed 29 West Virginia miners in April 2010, is "a reminder to remain ever vigilant."

Although the laws are now stronger and the industry has spent nearly $1 billion on emergency preparations since 2006, the report says there's little research to indicate how well mine operators have complied with the new regulations or whether they've been effective.

The industry and NIOSH must work to promote safety "as a core value of the industry," the report said, and that includes compiling existing research and recommendations from other high-hazard industries to help identify strengths and weaknesses.

The committee also recommended more research on effective, science-based materials, training and procedures to help miners make better decisions in crisis.

It suggests comprehensive self-escape scenarios be played out at every underground mine at least once a year, and that the lessons learned from those drills be collected and analyzed. It recommends the creation of a public database that could help anyone who's interested examine the outcomes.

NIOSH should also work with MSHA to ensure any new training is effective, and that miners retain what they learn.

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