Audit Finds Lack of Ill. Mine Inspectors

DAVID MERCER, Associated Press

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. (AP) — The state department in charge of mine safety lacked enough safety inspectors to comply with Illinois law in 2011 and 2012, according to an audit of the agency released Thursday.

Illinois' auditor general found that the Department of Natural Resources had 10 inspectors to handle the 40-plus mines operating in the state over those two years rather than the 16 required for that number of mines by the state Coal Mining Act. The law requires that mines be inspected once a month.

The audit also said the DNR hadn't established some needed policies to comply with the law, and in some cases hadn't maintained mine-related records.

A spokesman for the department said that, like other DNR operations such as state parks, the state's poor financial health had cut into its mining staff. Illinois faces both a massive government-budget deficit and an unfunded pension obligation that's close to $100 billion.

In fact, there are now nine full-time inspectors after one retired, DNR spokesman Chris McCloud said.

"The state's costly pension issues continue to impact the agency's budget, leaving the department without necessary funding to hire the number of coal mine inspectors as required by state law," McCloud said in an email.

But he said the department hadn't missed any inspections, relying now on the nine full-time inspectors plus five other department employees who are certified to do the work.

A spokesman for a mine-workers union said that agencies that oversee mining in many states are short on money to do their jobs.

"We see this not only in Illinois but in Kentucky and Alabama and West Virginia and Pennsylvania, and at the federal level," United Mineworkers of America spokesman Phil Smith said.

In Illinois, the union represents between 400 and 500 miners and other workers at a single mine and other smaller mining-related operations.

"It can be a dangerous occupation," Smith said. "They need to have somebody else looking out for them."

One Illinois miner died over the two years covered by the audit, according to the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration. The miner, 30-year-old Chad Meyers,

was crushed between a machine and the wall of the Saline County mine operated by a subsidiary of Peabody Energy, according to a preliminary MSHA report.

Three Illinois miners died in 2010, the year before the audit period, according to MSHA.

Data on miners injured wasn't immediately available.

Most Illinois miners work in the coal industry. State production actually increased last year after almost two decades of declines because of pollution concerns over the high sulfur content of the state's coal.

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