UT Mine Collapse Investigation Complete

PAUL FOY, Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — A Utah coal mine hadn't done enough to support the ceiling of a tunnel that collapsed on a machine operator, crushing the man under tons of weight, federal regulators said Monday.

The U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration released an investigation into the collapse that killed Elam Jones on March 22 in Carbon County about 10 miles west of Huntington.

Rhino Resource Partners LP didn't have enough 60-inch bolts drilled into the ceiling to keep it from falling down, and the bolts failed, the federal agency said in the report released Monday.

The danger should have been clear because the tunnel started caving in sideways first, accident investigators said. Their report also found a mobile roof support system used with mining machines wasn't kept over the active mining area.

The company was given several safety citations and told to revise their roof-control plan.

The deadly mishap resonated in Utah's coal mining communities because Jones, 29, had avoided a coal mine catastrophe five years before inside another Utah coal mine a few miles away.

Jones was on his way to the Crandall Canyon mine to start a shift when it collapsed in 2007, entombing six miners nearly a half-mile underground. Their bodies were never recovered. Another cave-in 10 days later killed two rescuers and a federal inspector trying to tunnel their way to the trapped miners.

Jones was proud to be a coal miner and viewed his job as less dangerous than highway driving, Julie Jones, told The Associated Press. He was a father to two young children and a fourth-generation miner.

Jones's helper, Dallen McFarlane, was injured in the same rock fall in March. He told investigators he heard the roof pop and the roof bolts break and was trapped — and protected — by a cavity of fallen rock.

Jones was using a grinding machine to chew into an 8-foot seam of coal when a sandstone layer above broke free. It was already working its way loose. Investigators found a 3-inch gap separating it from bedrock, putting extra pressure on the retaining bolts.

The 7-ton slab was up to 20 inches thick and about 16 feet long and 8 feet wide,

and it fell into smaller pieces.

Christopher Walton, president and chief executive of the Lexington, Ky.-based coal company, didn't respond to an email Monday from The Associated Press.

Scott Morris, a vice president of investor relations, said Rhino Resource Partners had no comment on the report or whether the company has taken corrective action.

Rhino Resource Partners takes about 1,200 tons of coal a day from the Castle Valley Mine No. 4.

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