Kentucky Cuts Mining Inspection Budget

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FRANKFORT, Ky. (AP) — Coal mines in Kentucky would be subject to fewer state inspections under the Senate's budget proposal — a change that safety advocates say would raise the risk for miners, but one the plan's proponents argue is justified given declining mining operations in the state.

State law currently requires six inspections annually for each mine. That number would be pared to two annually under the Senate's plan. The Republican-led Senate also voted this week for deeper spending cuts for the state's mine safety and licensing office than the Democratic-run House approved in its budget version.

House and Senate budget conferees began work Wednesday in hopes of reaching an accord on a new $20 billion state spending plan for the two-year period beginning July 1. The negotiators began a line-by-line review of their differences in hopes of having a final version ready to pass next week.

Senate President Robert Stivers defended his chamber's decision to reduce the number of required annual mine inspections by Kentucky regulators. Stivers, a Republican who represents an Appalachian district, said state mining regulators would retain the authority to step up visits to mines with safety concerns.

"It doesn't stop them from doing three, four, five and six (inspections), especially if they find a bad actor or get some type of referral," he said.

The mines also receive inspections from federal regulators, he said.

House Speaker Greg Stumbo also made a case for a budget cut for the mine-safety and licensing office.

"As we all know, there are fewer coal mines," said Stumbo, a Prestonsburg Democrat who represents another Appalachian district. "And there are fewer needs, then, for inspections. And so I think some adjustment probably can be absorbed."

Steve Earle, an international vice president for the United Mine Workers, termed as "unconscionable" the proposed combination of fewer required state inspections and budget cuts for mine-safety operations.

"What's a life worth?" he said by phone. "People's lives will be put in danger. People could die because of this."

Earle said the need for strict oversight of mine safety remains as strong as ever.

"There are still some bad apples in the barrel in this industry," he said.

Kentucky had two coal mining-related fatalities each in 2012 and 2013, compared to 15 in 2006, according to the state.

The proposed cuts in required inspections and mine-safety funding come amid a downturn in the state's Appalachian coal industry.

In 2008, there were 626 licensed mines operating in Kentucky, and as of March 20 of this year there were 283, according to the state Energy and Environment Cabinet. Coal production also occurs in sections of western Kentucky.

Meanwhile, both the Senate and House cut Gov. Steve Beshear's proposed funding for the state Office of Mine Safety and Licensing.

Beshear proposed $14.7 million for the office in the first year of the budget period and $14.9 million in the second year. The House's version included $12.4 million in the first year and $12.7 million in the second year. The Senate's plan contained $9.8 million for the first year and $10 million in the second.

The governor's proposal included nearly $7.6 million of coal severance-tax revenue in each of the next two years for the office that inspects and licenses coal mines. The House lowered that amount to nearly $5.3 million each year, and the Senate included $2.6 million of that amount per year.

The Energy and Environment Cabinet warned the cuts would "greatly compromise" its ability to maintain current safety levels for miners.

"The General Assembly, following the Darby Mine disaster, wisely increased funding for mine safety and safety training so that this would not occur in Kentucky mines," the Cabinet said. "The rate of injuries and fatalities in Kentucky mines has been decreasing since that time. With passage of the Senate version of the ... budget plan, every miner in Kentucky will be put at great risk every time they enter a mine."

In 2006, five miners were killed in an explosion at the Kentucky Darby No. 1 Mine in Harlan County.

The Senate's proposed budget cuts would result in deep staffing reductions in the mine safety and licensing office, the Cabinet said. Full-time staffing would shrink from 145 now to about 85, it said.

Stivers said the Cabinet's criticism was an attempt to "protect their turf" at a time when hundreds of coal mines have closed.

"They still want the full appropriation," he said. "Tell me what the need is for that?"

Many Kentucky lawmakers, including Stivers, have blamed stricter federal environmental regulations for causing the coal industry's woes.

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