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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-06-370T](#), a report to Subcommittee on Labor, HHS and Education, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The Chairman, Subcommittee on Labor, HHS and Education, Senate Committee on Appropriations, asked GAO to submit a statement for the record highlighting findings from our 2003 report on how well the Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) oversees its process for reviewing and approving critical types of mine plans and the extent to which MSHA's inspections and accident investigations processes help ensure the safety and health of underground coal miners.

What GAO Recommends

In our September 2003 report, GAO recommended that MSHA

- monitor the timeliness of inspections conducted as part of the 6-month review of certain mine plans;
- ensure that mine operators are correcting hazards identified during inspections in a timely manner;
- develop a plan for addressing anticipated shortages in the number of qualified inspectors due to upcoming retirements; and
- revise the systems used to collect information on accidents and investigations.

Although MSHA did not comment on our recommendations in its written response to the report, it subsequently agreed to implement all of the recommendations. We have not, however, evaluated the effectiveness MSHA's actions.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-370T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robert E. Robertson at (202) 512-7215 or robertsonr@gao.gov.

MINE SAFETY

MSHA's Programs for Ensuring the Safety and Health of Coal Miners Could Be Strengthened

What GAO Found

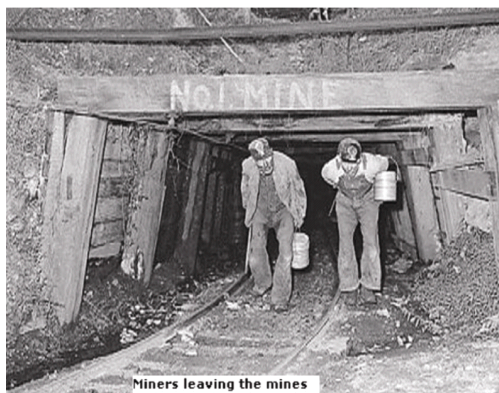
As of 2003, to help ensure the safety and health of underground coal miners, MSHA staff reviewed and approved mine plans, conducted inspections, and investigated serious accidents. In these three areas, MSHA had extensive procedures and qualified staff. However, we concluded that MSHA could improve its oversight, guidance, and human-capital-planning efforts.

We found that MSHA was not effectively monitoring a few key areas. MSHA headquarters did not ensure that 6-month inspections of ventilation and roof support plans were being completed on a timely basis. This failure could have led to mines operating without up-to-date plans or mine operators not following all requirements of the plans. Additionally, MSHA officials did not always ensure that hazards found during inspections were corrected promptly. Gaps were found in the information that MSHA used to monitor fatal and nonfatal injuries, limiting trend analysis and agency oversight. Specifically, the agency did not collect information on hours worked by independent contractors staff needed to compute fatality and nonfatal injury rates for specific mines, and it was difficult to link information on accidents at underground coal mines with MSHA's investigations.

We also concluded that the guidance provided by MSHA management to agency employees could be strengthened. Some inspections procedures were unclear and were contained in many sources, leading to differing interpretations by mine inspectors. The guidance on coordinating inspections conducted by specialists and regular inspectors was also unclear, resulting in some duplication of effort.

Finally, as of 2003, although about 44 percent of MSHA's underground coal mine inspectors were going to be eligible to retire within 5 years, the agency had no plan for replacing them or using other human capital flexibilities available to retain its highly qualified and trained inspectors.

Miners Exiting an Underground Coal Mine



Source: Mine Safety and Health 2000 calendar.