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MSHA demonstrates innovative system for escape during mine emergencies

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) today debuted an innovative new concept to assist miners in evacuating an underground mine quickly and safely during a mine emergency. MSHA demonstrated its "Great Escape" rescue system at the agency's Approval and Certification Center in Triadelphia, W.Va.

"This mine escape system offers miners many of the life-preserving benefits of a refuge shelter and self-contained self-rescuers," said Richard E. Stickler, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health. "Furthermore, minimal training is required, as the system's approach is simple and straightforward. It reinforces the premise that, whenever possible, miners should attempt escape before barricading themselves deeper in the mine."

The rescue approach was conceived and developed by MSHA's Office of Technical Support. The prototype demonstration system consists of concrete pipe measuring approximately 42 inches in diameter and accessible at various points along the pipe. Doors and vents are installed in the unit's access points/end caps. Actual escape system installations may be able to use smaller diameter pipe and may be installed between the mine's working sections and an escape shaft or, depending on the mine layout, run completely to the surface.

The escape system would be fitted with a communication and tracking infrastructure and battery-powered personnel carriers to transport miners to the surface. A fan situated at the surface would pump in breathable air through a borehole connected directly to the escape pipe, thus potentially satisfying the breathable air requirements as an alternative to refuge alternatives. Such a system also could minimize the time miners would need to wear their self-contained self-rescuers.

The durability of the concrete pipe would ensure an uncompromised communication and tracking system, and reinforced steel in the escapeway could conceivably serve as a medium frequency communications system antenna.

MSHA's next steps will be to evaluate feedback from industry stakeholders, and to continue to test the prototype system and make overall system improvements.

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