

Testimony of Jon M. Huntsman, Jr.
Governor, State of Utah
October 3, 2007
Testimony before the Committee on Education and Labor
Hearing on “Mine Safety: The Perspective of the Families at Crandall Canyon”

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to testify this morning about a tragic event in our state’s history – the collapse of the mine at Crandall Canyon - and the importance of mine safety to the citizens of our state and this great nation. It is an honor for me to be here today alongside members of these wonderful families who endured weeks of excruciating, and possibly needless, uncertainty regarding their loved ones.

On August 6, 2007, my office received word of the mine collapse. Over the next several weeks many unsuccessful attempts were made to rescue those six miners trapped inside. During one of the many heroic rescue attempts, three miners were killed and several others injured. The families of all the miners who died and were injured deserve to have a full understanding of the circumstances that led to the deaths of their loved ones.

Coal has been an important part of Utah’s economy for decades and will continue to be for generations to come. As such, it is incumbent upon us to learn what might be done differently in the future to protect the safety and welfare of our brave coal miners. Our miners know the inherent danger associated with their line of work, but have generally been willing to accept some risk in order to be employed at the mines. Many have told me that they would like to make the mines safer but are concerned that if the mines become overly regulated, the owners will close the doors. The mines are the economic base of many of these communities which would be devastated by such a closure. These communities are already struggling with not only the closure of the collapsed Crandall Canyon Mine, but also the subsequent temporary closure of the Tower Mine. Therefore, we must all, at the state and federal levels, strike the right balance between protecting the health and safety of our miners and appropriate regulation of the mining industry.

The federal government has regulated mine safety in Utah since 1977, upon the creation of the Mine Safety and Health Administration. Following that federal action, the state’s role was reduced by state legislative actions over the next several years. Since 1987, state involvement in miner safety has been limited to miner certification. This most recent horrific accident at Crandall Canyon has been an extremely painful reminder that Utah must critically assess its role in ensuring mine safety. To this end, I have created the Utah Mine Safety Commission, chaired by Scott Matheson, Jr., former dean of the University of Utah Law School and former United States Attorney. The Commission members include former United States’ Senator Jake Garn, Huntington Mayor Hilary Gordon, Price Mayor Joe Piccolo, State Senator Mike Dmitrich, State Representative Kay McIff, Dennis O’Dell, Safety and Health Director of the United Mine Workers of America, and David Litvin, Utah Mining Association President.

The Commission is charged to:

- 1- Review the role of the State of Utah in the area of mine safety, including the safety inspection process, accident prevention, and accident response;
- 2- Review the Crandall Canyon Mine disaster and the State's role in mine safety leading up to the accident;
- 3- Examine how the State can assure itself that MSHA and private mining companies are doing everything reasonably possible to ensure the safety of Utah miners, their families, and their communities;
- 4- Make appropriate policy recommendations regarding how the state should promote mine safety and accident prevention.

This Commission is a panel of extraordinary public servants. In order for them to be able to serve Utahns well, they need to work closely and collaboratively with MSHA and its investigation team. It's important for them to have real-time access to the information being gathered in order to implement needed changes at the state level. To accomplish this, I call upon the U.S. Department of Labor, through MSHA, to begin providing logical points of connection with our UMSC that will allow a useful flow of information from the ongoing federal investigation. Today, such a connection does not exist and the risk of uneven outcomes is very real.

In summary, the State of Utah is concerned that a mine collapse like that which occurred at Crandall Canyon never happen again in Utah or anywhere else. And, if it should occur, that we have in place protocols and equipment that will protect and save miners' lives, as well as expedite successful recovery efforts.

Thank you.