

Remarks of
Joseph A. Main, Assistant Secretary of Labor
for Mine Safety and Health
10th Anniversary of Queecreek Mine Rescue
Somerset County, Pennsylvania
July 28, 2012

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to celebrate one of the most successful mine rescue events in modern mining history. Having been involved in many mine emergencies over the past 30 years, I know this 10th Anniversary celebration of the rescue of nine miners from the Queecreek mine is by all measures historic.

It is a story about quick actions by miners that allowed their fellow miners to escape through perilous conditions in a flooded mine. It is also a story about the quick decisions made by both the

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trapped miners and their rescuers that set the stage for a successful outcome.

As most of you may remember, soon after the inundation occurred, nine of the 18 miners underground were able to escape. The other nine miners were not so lucky.

Those on the surface moved quickly to determine the likely location of the miners trapped by the massive inundation of water from the adjoining abandoned mine. Once this was done, the task of drilling to reach them began.

During this time, the world anxiously watched and hoped for a miracle even though there was no indication from underground that the trapped miners were even alive. The mine operator, MSHA, the State of Pennsylvania, the landowners (Bill and Lori

Arnold), local first responders, Consol Energy's Enlow Fork Mine Rescue team, the U.S. Navy, Red Cross volunteers, the Salvation Army, drilling companies, vendors and suppliers, public officials including the Governor of Pennsylvania, and many others came to help.

There were considerable emotional ups and downs during the four days of this intensive rescue effort. The high point came on the third night when taps on a drill steel let everyone know that the nine miners were alive. The mission had its down moments, as well. The drilling operation started fast and ended up being slow and tedious. Along with other drilling problems, the bit used to drill a hole large enough to fit MSHA's escape capsule broke.

While the capsule had been specially designed for mine rescue, until Quecreek, it had been used for decades to train MSHA mine personnel at the National Mine Academy.

The teamwork was exceptional throughout the rescue effort, and the operation, while not without its frustrations, was seamless.

The singular focus of all involved was where it should have been: on the rescue of the nine trapped miners.

The world was riveted as MSHA's capsule brought each miner — one by one -- to safety in the early morning hours of July 28, 2002.

There are many lessons learned from that July event 10 years ago, lessons that guide us today in performing mine rescue operations and in better protecting miners.

Following Quecreek, MSHA improved the capsule's capability so it could enter and exit a drill hole more easily. Eight years later, a team of NASA engineers developed another capsule modeled after MSHA's, and it was used successfully to rescue 33 Chilean miners who had been trapped for 69 days in a gold and copper mine.

Other positive improvements came out of MSHA's experience at Quecreek. The root cause of the Quecreek inundation was that the mine was using an inaccurate mining map. After Quecreek, Congress passed legislation requiring an underground mine operator that closes or abandons a mine to file with MSHA a copy of a mine map current at the time of the closure. These maps are retained in a repository and made available to mine operators of adjacent properties.

In addition, MSHA is currently working with the Interstate Mining Compact Commission, a multi-state governmental organization representing the natural resource interests of its member states, as well as individual states to promote the centralization of mine map information for all underground mines in the United States.

As well, MSHA has developed a mine emergency mapping tool on our web site to supply information to stakeholders about the locations of equipment and supplies, including drill rigs and large water pumps.

When I became Assistant Secretary over two years ago, one of my top priorities was to identify further gaps in mine emergency response, and to close them.

Working with stakeholders, I believe we have made significant progress by developing new technologies to aid in mine rescue, increasing mine emergency response training, improving command and control preparedness and engaging the mining community in a dialogue to identify and implement additional improvements. In May, MSHA held a coal emergency mine summit at the Mine Academy, with many in the mine emergency community participating. We convened mine emergency response experts to talk about outstanding issues in emergency response and discussed action plans.

Also in May, MSHA, along with Consol Energy, the State of Pennsylvania and others, staged an all-day Mine Emergency Response Development (MERD) exercise at Consol's Bailey BMX mine located in Wind Ridge, PA. This first of its kind in PA simulation of a mine accident with trapped miners gave us the

opportunity to test MSHA's newly improved Seismic Location System. Simulated trapped miners signaled from 980 feet underground by pounding with a timber on a roof bolt. This system detected the seismic signals.

Other technologies that were successfully tested included an innovative mine rescue communications system, and the MSHA permissible mine robot. MSHA has posted a video of that exercise on its website, and I encourage you to watch the event. It illustrates just how far we have come in developing mine rescue technology.

Finally, in July, MSHA held another stakeholder meeting at MSHA headquarters to further our discussions about mine rescue and to discuss other areas where we can work together.

Mine emergency response requires cooperation between MSHA and state officials and other stakeholders and I believe we are moving in the right direction.

Unfortunately, the success of the mine rescue at Quecreek involving no loss of life has proved to be the exception to the rule. The Darby, Aracoma, Sago accidents in 2006 took the lives of 19 miners. In 2008, the Crandall Canyon mine disaster resulted in the deaths of six miners and three rescue workers.

These tragedies were followed by the explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine on April 5, 2010, the worst mine accident in 40 years.

Just yesterday, I attended the dedication of a Monument inspired by the 29 miners who needlessly lost their lives at Upper Big Branch. It was a somber time for all of us, but especially for the

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miners' families and friends who continue to mourn their loss. It was a reminder that we can never forget those who have perished in mine accidents and that we must increase our efforts to prevent these disasters from ever happening again.

As President Obama said of miners immediately following the Upper Big Branch tragedy, "we owe them more than prayers. We owe them action. We owe them accountability. We owe them an assurance that when they go to work every day, when they enter that dark mine, they are not alone. They ought to know that behind them there is a company that's doing what it takes to protect them, and a government that is looking out for their safety."

Today, I speak for President Obama, Secretary of Labor Solis, and myself, in saying that this Administration has worked tirelessly to

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get to the bottom of what happened at Upper Big Branch and to apply the lessons learned to prevent this from happening again.

It has motivated us to increase our efforts to aggressively enforce the Mine Act, and we continue to move forward to maximize the positive impact we can have on the lives of our nation's miners.

All of us know mines can be operated safely and while many live up to that responsibility, there are those that do not. While MSHA and many in the mining industry have undergone significant change as we have sought to find and fix deficiencies in mine safety and health, we know that more needs to be done to improve mine safety and instill a culture of prevention in the entire mining community.

But today is a day for celebration and to remind ourselves that we are capable of great things. At Quecreek, the nine brave miners made all the right decisions underground to survive, and the mine rescuers---and those who supported them--made all the right decisions on the surface. You all came together and did not give up until each and every miner was pulled to safety.