

Murray Energy wrangles with feds

Safety » 3 'bounces' have ruined machinery and injured a miner.

By **MIKE GORRELL**
The Salt Lake Tribune

Three "bounces" of coal in Murray Energy Co.'s West Ridge mine, the last of which injured a miner last week, have shut down the mine's longwall mining machine and sparked a legal fight between the company and the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA).

Murray Energy's Utah subsidiary, UtahAmerican Energy Inc., has asked a federal administrative law judge in Denver to overturn an MSHA citation requiring the company to change its roof control plan before the longwall machine can operate again.

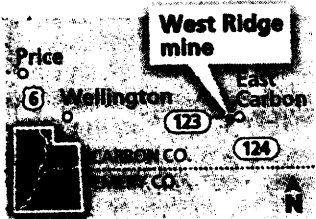
The company also is challenging MSHA's requirement that a barrier pillar of coal be left between future sections to be mined by the longwall.

MSHA contends barrier pillars are needed to support the mountain above the mine, which is moving into areas deeper beneath Carbon

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West Ridge mine

Federal mining officials have stopped longwall mining in Murray Energy Corp.'s Carbon County mine because of "bounces," one of which injured a miner last week.



Murray

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County's Book Cliffs. Increased depth usually leaves mines prone to outbursts of coal, known as "bounces" or "bumps," because of pressure exerted by the weight of more ground overhead.

"We want to make sure the operator has a plan in place to protect [miners] from the hazards of these bounces," said Kevin Stricklin, who heads MSHA's coal division.

Murray Energy Corp. vice president Rob Murray declined to comment.

The West Ridge dispute extends animosities between MSHA and Murray Energy that emerged Aug. 6, 2007, when the walls of the company-operated Crandall Canyon mine imploded on a six-man crew excavating what was left of a barrier pillar between two mined-out sections.

Three would-be rescuers were killed 10 days later in a second outburst of the mine's walls. In July, MSHA fined Genwal Resources Inc., the Murray Energy subsidiary that operated Crandall Canyon, \$1.34 million for violations that allegedly contributed directly to the deaths of the first six miners. The company is contesting those fines.

MSHA also recommended a U.S. Attorney's Office investigation to determine if criminal actions led to the disaster. That probe is continuing.

After Crandall Canyon, MSHA also imposed additional safety measures on operators of deep underground mines, provisions that ultimately prompted Murray Energy to close its Tower mine in Carbon County.

The current West Ridge dispute stems from bounces on Jan. 24, Jan. 26 and Jan. 31.

MSHA's Stricklin said the first two events damaged cutting parts on the longwall machine, which carves off long lines of coal, about 2,000 feet below the surface (the Crandall Canyon collapse occurred 1,870 feet down).

Federal mine inspectors issued orders after both events. The first shut down that section of the mine for a day, the second for three days while MSHA did inspections and awaited company changes

West Ridge Mine

Murray Energy's Carbon County coal mine employed 345 people at the end of 2008. The mine yielded 3.8 million tons of coal last year, down from 4.25 million tons in 2007.

Source: Federal Mine Safety and Health Administration

What's next?

A Federal Mine Safety and Health Review Commission judge in Denver will hold a hearing Thursday and Friday on Murray Energy's appeal of a roof-control citation at West Ridge coal mine.

to the mining plan to lessen the risk of more bounces.

Stricklin said the company changed the speed of its mining equipment. It also installed steel supports and chains to reduce the chances of coal bursting out from the mining face and hitting miners, who were outfitted with "gear like catcher's equipment for a baseball team."

Even before the second order was lifted on Jan. 29, UtahAmerican Energy appealed MSHA's citation seeking more stringent roof-control measures.

But then an unidentified foreman was hit by a outburst of coal on Jan. 31, suffering injured ribs and a collapsed lung. MSHA issued another order, still in place, that shuts down the longwall machine until the agency approves changes to the roof-control plan.

"We're looking for engineering changes to help us out," Stricklin said, noting the order does not impact work in two adjacent sections of West Ridge.

The bounce threat also compelled MSHA to ask the company to leave long barrier pillars of coal between future longwall sections to provide extra roof support.

"Our experts feel that with the cover [the amount of rock overhead] we have and the history we have, it's important to have that barrier forming to be safe," Stricklin added. "The company rejects that."

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