

# Wilberg Tragedy Helped Build Utah Mine Safety

By Mike Gorrell  
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The Wilberg Mine disaster struck home to Utah coal people

"This can happen to us," they realized, not just to miners with unfamiliar names in faraway places. They knew the 27 miners who died in 1984 when a fire broke out in the Emery County mine because of a series of mistakes and shortcuts.

An air compressor with two bypassed safety devices was turned on inadvertently and ran unattended for 69 hours before igniting. The mine's ventilation system carried the fire's deadly gases directly toward the victims and filled their escape routes.

Most miners say that since Wilberg, they are more safety conscious, companies are more committed to safe mining practices, and U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration inspectors, accused then of being lax, are enforcing the law more diligently.

As a result, Utah's coal mines are safer than ever.

"We're seeing tremendous changes and improvements in miners' attitudes toward safety," said Greg Ferderber, chairman of the mining department at the College of Eastern Utah in Price.

Utah had no underground fatalities in three of the last six years, he said, and the frequency of lost-time accidents was cut in half from 1977 to 1991.

Nationally, 3,000 miners died each year at the turn of the century, MSHA director William Tattersall noted. The number dropped under 100 for the first time in 1983 and has remained there except for 1984, when disaster struck at Wilberg.

Disasters always have triggered revisions of safety laws, and Wilberg was no exception. Shortly after the investigation was completed, MSHA enacted 16 rule changes to prohibit practices or correct deficiencies made painfully evident by the fire.

Air compressors now must be kept in fireproof structures and equipped with fire-suppression devices. Companies must give

miners more hands-on training with breathing apparatus. Aluminum ventilation structures susceptible to heat failure are banned. More attention is paid to escape drills and keeping potential escapeways free of cave-ins.

A complete upgrade of ventilation regulations also was initiated (eight years later, new rules were issued in mid-May). Wilberg demonstrated how quickly a problem can escalate into a tragedy when the integrity of an underground mine's intricate ventilation system is compromised.

In years since, MSHA has initiated a "Job Safety Analysis Program" to help miners evaluate job hazards. MSHA also has increased penalties for major violations fivefold, cracked down on mines with a history of violations and increased its control over small mines where accident rates are highest.

Safety has improved, union leaders say, even if the United Mine Workers' latest *Journal* attacks companies for indifference to safety and MSHA for ineffective enforcement.

Mr. Tattersall shrugged off the criticism. "It's not true that we're lax on enforcement," he said. "Obviously, that's a union house organ designed to influence their membership. It's good unionism."

UMWA safety committeemen Ralph Keele, Harry Reddington and Jim Stevenson said worker-management cooperation is better since Wilberg and MSHA inspectors are around more. "It's too bad it takes miners dying to get something done," Mr. Stevenson said.

After the fire, the union fought against "two-entry systems" in which only two parallel tunnels are drilled to a section where coal is mined. It said Wilberg proved that two tunnels do not provide enough escape routes.

But an administrative law judge agreed with the company and agency position that two tunnels were sufficient if both had sophisticated atmospheric monitoring and fire-detection systems.

The judge also determined the

## Coal Mining History

### Coal Mine Fatalities

Years	Deaths	
	Utah	Nation
1884-1912	338	42,898
1913-1933	627	45,425
1934-1940	55	8,794
1941-1945	123	6,554
1946-1952	73	5,686
1953-1969	90	5,516
1970-1980	32	1,687
1981-1991	55	838
1992	1	18
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,394</b>	<b>117,516</b>

### Utah Coal Operators, Employment and Production

Years	Operators	Mines	Miners	Tonnage (million)
1981	16	28	4,166	13.8
1982	16	29	4,296	16.9
1983	15	25	2,707	11.8
1984	15	24	2,525	12.2
1985	15	22	2,563	12.8
1986	16	21	2,881	14.3
1987	16	20	2,650	16.5
1988	14	17	2,559	18.2
1989	14	20	2,471	20.5
1990	13	18	2,791	22.0
1991	12	18	2,701	22.3

Source: Federal and state records, Utah Energy Office

Steve Baker / The Salt Lake Tribune

extra voids created by more tunnels generate extra pressure, which is released in the form of falling roofs and collapsing walls that kill and maim more miners than explosions or fires.

Such was the case of Utah's latest fatality, Thomas Kubota. He died Feb. 11 in the Skyline No. 1 Mine when he was buried under falling rock and coal in a tunnel whose roof he was reinforcing.

"We had an unfortunate accident," said Vernal Mortensen of Coastal States Energy Co., parent company of the mine owner, Utah Fuel Co. MSHA issued Utah Fuel four citations. Company lawyers are reviewing the

citations for possible appeals.

Just how influential government fines are in driving safety compliance is debatable. After all, the then-record \$110,000 fine assessed against Utah Power for Wilberg was pocket change compared to the \$98 million at stake in a products-liability trial spawned by the disaster.

The latter figure illustrates how costly accidents can be, even minor ones. "You can't afford to have accidents and compete," said Sam Quigley, general manager of Andalex Resources, which owns three mines outside of Price. "You should see the programs we have in place to reduce lost-time accidents."