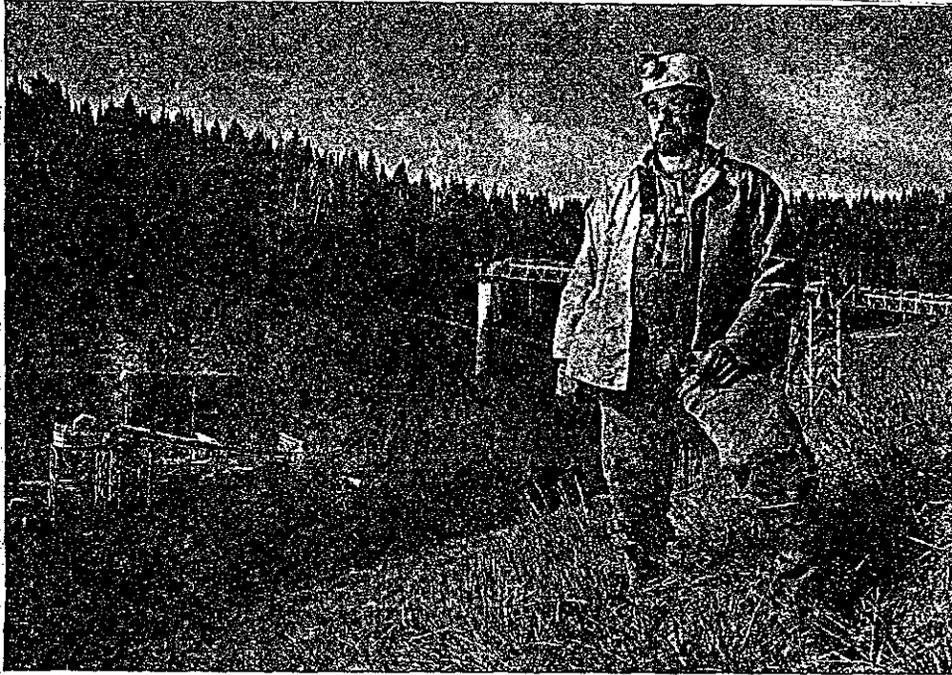


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Lynn K. Johnson/The Salt Lake Tribune

Utah coal miner Harry Reddington hopes uncertainty gives way to prosperity at Valley Camp mine near Scofield.

# Utah Coal Mines Fight to Stay in the Black

By Mike Gorrell  
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Harry Reddington keeps coal cut deep underground from spilling off a conveyor belt on its way to the surface. He makes sure the belt does not overheat and start a fire, or kick up too much lung-damaging dust.

But after 14 years at the Valley Camp of Utah mine in Carbon County, Mr. Reddington and 50 colleagues may lose their jobs next month.

Valley Camp miners are not alone. The livelihoods of miners statewide are im-

periled as the market for Utah coal diminishes and machines replace people.

Environmental concerns have tempered the expansion of power plants that burn coal to create electricity. Exports have fallen short of expectations. Transportation costs have made it difficult for isolated Utah mines to compete in distant domestic markets.

At the same time, overproduction with efficient machines has created huge stockpiles, driving down the price of coal and eliminating jobs.

Valley Camp's employees received no-

tice May 1 of possible layoffs or closure of the mine if a new contract for its coal is not obtained.

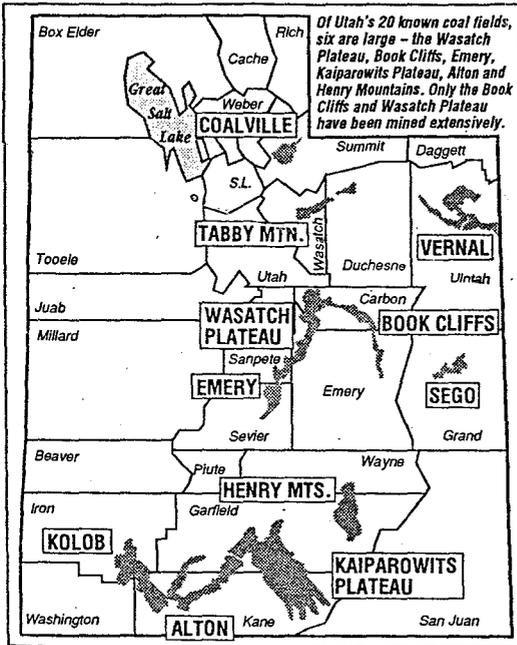
"It doesn't mean they'll shut down the mine. We've seen it before. We always seem to survive," Mr. Reddington said.

But the uncertainty is draining. "It interrupts your lifestyle. It makes it hard not knowing what's going to happen in two months. Do we go on vacation or do we stock up for a possible layoff?"

Utah Mining Association President

See A-4, Column 1

## UTAH'S COAL FIELDS



The Salt Lake Tribune Graphic

## More Utah Miners Find Themselves Jobless As Mines Become More Efficient, Cleaner

Continued from A-1

Jack Christensen estimates a third of Utah's dozen coal companies are "barely holding their heads above water."

These trying times come after the Emery, Soldier Creek and Hiawatha mines closed in the last two years, tossing more than 200 miners out of work.

Job seekers are lining up at Andalex Resources' mines outside of Price. "The number of applicants we get here is just overwhelming," said general manager Sam Quigley, a fifth-generation miner.

"It's horrible. Everybody is constantly concerned. This puts a lot of stress on the work force."

"I have 100 employees. They have families they're devoted to. They're important people in their communities and respective churches. They're mainstream cross sections of real Utah people."

"They're Mormons, they're Catholics, they're Italians, they're Hispanics, they're everything. If you had three or four kids and were the main providers, and your industry started feeling a crunch, you'd be concerned."

In the past, many jobs returned each time the boom-and-bust cycle boomed. But mechanization is transforming mining into an industry that needs fewer people to produce more coal.

The longwall-mining machine is largely responsible. Its blade can chew away relentlessly at the coal seam as it sweeps back and forth across the length of the machine, which can extend up to 1,000 feet. Small chunks are dumped on a conveyor belt and carried out of the mine. A longwall crew of 10 can produce as much coal in a day as hundreds of miners did in a decade ago.

Utah's coal production in

Utah never has been greater. Some 22 million tons were excavated in each of the last two years, triple the output 15 years earlier.

Yet, the price of coal declined in 1991 for the 10th straight year. A ton of coal sold for \$21.55 last year, down from \$29.42 in 1982. In industry mathematics, more coal plus lower prices equal fewer employees.

Employment peaked in 1982 with 4,300 people at 29 Utah mines. Now there are roughly 2,500 miners in 16 Utah mines.

The longwall's efficiency will keep numbers down. Newer longwalls, in fact, have smaller crews. Computers perform tasks previously done by one or two miners.

Not all companies can use longwalls because of geologic conditions. Others cannot afford them. The price is \$20 million to \$25 million.

Coastal States Energy Co. is one company that can. Its subsidiaries own the Skyline mines outside of Scofield and the Sufco Mine near Salina. They employ about 660.

An additional longwall made the Skyline mines Utah's top producer in 1991 and the country's second most productive underground mine (Utah Power's Wilberg/Cottonwood Mine is third, its Deer Creek Mine seventh).

But Vernal Mortensen, Coastal's senior vice president, maintains that hefty production numbers hardly dispel jitters about the future. Particularly worrisome since Utah is so geographically isolated from major markets is the amount of cut coal sitting on the ground with no buyers.

"There are 4 million tons of coal on the ground right now. If we mine 20 million tons, that's 20 percent of it. The stockpile either will get bigger or someone will stop mining. I hope I'm one of the survivors. We're certainly try-

week or two of production, we're in trouble." He blames government overregulation, particularly environmental laws that dissuade industries from burning coal.

Environmental laws and health-and-safety requirements hit small companies hardest, their smaller budgets less able to absorb added costs.

"Mining is one of the most pervasively regulated industries and has been for the last 15 years," observed Terry O'Connor, a Denver-based spokesman for the not-so-small Arco Coal Co., whose subsidiaries include the Beaver Creek mine in Carbon County.

"With regulation comes additional costs. Some small companies do not have the capital or the will to comply. Those that don't have progressive policies find themselves under constant attack and many times out of business."

In the United Mine Workers of America's "Laid-Off Available Worker" program after the Hiawatha Mine closed in March, only a dozen found mining jobs, said "job coach" Wade Hansen.

In his 23 years at the century-old Sunnyside mines above East Carbon, third-generation miner Jim Stevenson has seen ownership changes, bankruptcy mechanization and computerization.

The operation is as efficient now as ever, Mr. Stevenson said. But, ironically, "this is probably the only industry where workers lose their jobs if they up their production. The more efficient you are, the sooner you lose your job."

Current owner Sunnyside Reclamation & Salvage, Inc., employs 102, far fewer than in the mines' heyday. Sunnyside has a steady customer in Geneva Steel, but mine manager Joe Fiedler said times are difficult. "If we lose a

When they do, they buy a lot less. Mines are trying to reuse everything they can. They're watching all their pennies."

Emery County's economy depends so heavily on Utah Power's mines and power plants, said Assessor Jim Fauver, that "if they hiccup, we have a heart attack."

Carbon County cannot win, said clerk and auditor Norman Prichard. "We have several different mines in our county competing for the same market. Competition is great, but it also lays off coal miners when a company loses a contract because it was beat out by a mine across the county."

"That hurts a community our size. I know people who are leaving because they can't find a job. There are no jobs here."

A laid-off miner's chances of finding a coal job in Utah are slim. Of 151 people who enrolled

ing."

Even at Utah Power mines, which are more stable because they supply coal to their own power plants, uncertainty lurks, said Ralph Keele, a pump examiner at Deer Creek. A layoff "is a pretty good worry, even at our mine. When the company really needs to cut prices, they have a layoff. That's the easiest way to reduce your cost per ton."

Declining employment hurts the economy. With fewer miners, less wages are spent on groceries and other items that keep communities going.

The absence of circulating wages is just part of the problem. Van Campagni, an official with Fairmont Supply Co., a mining-supply firm in Price, said "coal companies don't buy in the quantities they used to. They're not buying larger-ticket items — electrical cable, conveyor belt-