

Kaiser coal mine shuts indefinitely

Federal officials find safety violations; closure leaves 210 without jobs

SUNNYSIDE, Carbon County — The Kaiser Coal Corp. mine at Sunnyside — the only employer in the East Carbon area — closed indefinitely Friday after federal officials shut down a section of the mine because of safety violations.

The closure leaves 210 miners without jobs and made more precarious the position of a company that already has received protection from creditors under Chapter 11 of the federal bankruptcy code.

Kathryn Snyder, MSHA spokeswoman in Washington, said the order was issued because of a federal regulation that says intake and return-air courses must be separated from conveyor belt entries in areas of the mine that are being developed. In other words, the mine should have three rather than two entries.

She said two-entry systems, especially where longwall mining is done, have come under greater scrutiny since the deadly Wilberg fire in December 1984. In the past, a modification to the three-entry requirement could be made by MSHA district managers. But a task force appointed after the Wilberg fire recommended there be more central control and formal petitions for modification be filed.

Mine general manager Charles Mcglothlin said that even though the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration order cites only one area of the mine, the mine cannot operate without the belt mentioned in the order.

He said the mine, one of several subsidiaries of Kaiser Steel Corp., has been struggling to stay in business. He said the company is

trying to sell the mine and representatives of a large corporation that is a potential buyer were looking at the mine Friday.

"The people from MSHA shut it down right before their (the potential buyers') eyes," Mcglothlin said.

Snyder said Kaiser had received a letter in September 1985 putting the company on notice for a violation.

But Mcglothlin said he does not consider the letter to be binding and a petition for modification has been filed but not acted upon. He said the geology of the Sunnyside mine actually makes a two-entry system safer than a three-entry system.

The Kaiser mine has successfully used the longwall system with a two-entry mining

plan for 26 years, Mcglothlin said. Kaiser was the second mine in the country to install the longwall system.

He said Sens. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and Ted Kennedy, D-Mass, will receive a petition written by some of the mine supervisors saying the two-entry system is the safest method for Kaiser and MSHA has not acted expeditiously on a petition for modification. Kennedy, chairman of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, is scheduled to begin hearings April 7 in Washington.

Snyder said people cited for violation of federal safety standards have the right to contest the ruling and ask for a hearing before an administrative law judge. She said they can ask for an expedited hearing.