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Reopening efforts advance at Willow Creek

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At top, team captain Roger Jones and Bill Burton trade places when it comes to mine rescue work. Under normal circumstances, Burton is Jones' boss. Since the Willow Creek fire, circumstances have been anything but normal. Crews are diligently working to return to normalcy as quickly as possible. The rescue team members stress that the full apparatus they are required to wear underground gets heavy by the end of the day. At right, it has been a much easier, quicker task for heavy equipment operators to remove the dirt sealing the portals in the clear light of day than it was to seal the mine entries in the black of night and smoke on the eve of Thanksgiving Day.

It's an odor people never forget. Carbon County residents who spend time at the offices and portal of the Willow Creek mine will smell the burnt coal that still lingers after the fire that happened the day before Thanksgiving.

And the odor continues, but not in a bad sense. There are miners who wreak of burnt coal and feel good about it because they are now allowed to spend two to four hours inside Willow Creek per shift.

Last week, mine rescue team members entered Willow Creek for the first time since the fire. They went about 1,000 feet underground to take atmosphere readings, assess the damage and determine a location to install a seal.

Since that time, several teams of rescue workers have been donning the 40 plus pound apparatus and entering the mine. They have sealed the

portals in the first crosscut with brattice and foam.

The sealed portion of Willow is ventilated and workers then start sealing off the mine deeper inside. Sealing and ventilating will take place at each section until the mine is totally reopened. The process will be completed over a period of months.

Willow Creek employees are presently ventilating the atmosphere with an auxiliary fan, but expect to have penetrated the mine far enough to use the main fans soon.

There is a considerable amount of work that has to be done using human power. Workers are moving lengths of pipe weighing 780 pounds inside the portal. The pipes will be used for additional ventilation of the mine's atmosphere.

Once a section is ventilated, the walls will be rock dusted and the process will start over to access more of the mine.

While work goes on inside the mine, heavy equipment is being used

to remove dirt from around the mouth of the portals. Dirt was trucked in to complete a seal on Thanksgiving Day. It is taking considerably less time to remove it since the air is now clear.

The sealing was done in complete darkness caused by heavy clouds of smoke. Equipment workers were guided into place by mine rescue team members using flares for direction.

According to Willow Creek personnel, reopening a mine after a fire is a careful, long and hard process. Mine rescue teams assisting with the project include squads from Willow Creek and 20 Mile Coal Company in Steamboat Springs, Colo.

"That whole pack gets heavy after a two- or three-hour shift. Your shoulders and neck are really aching," commented one miner.

The miner explained that, with the apparatus, there is no eating or talking while underground.

"There is no breaking the seal on your face once the mask is on and you are inside," concluded the miner.



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