

Mine safety agency vows to raise fine amounts

Thu Feb 16, 2006 1:50 PM ET

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. Mine Safety and Health Agency on Thursday said it would revise its penalties for safety violations, after a rash of coal mining accidents have brought attention to its decades-old fining system.

Congress sets a ceiling for fines on health and safety violations, currently at \$60,000, and MSHA determines the exact amounts based on a formula set in 1982 that can result in charges as small as \$60.

After mine operators correct unsafe conditions through an appeals process, fines can often fall to zero.

MSHA did not spell out in a press release what the new fines would be, saying only that it intended to change the current formula for calculating them.

West Virginia lawmakers have introduced identical bills in the House of Representatives and the Senate calling for significant changes in the fining structure, including a mandatory minimum penalty of \$10,000.

President George W. Bush has asked Congress to raise the maximum penalty to \$220,000.

Pressure has mounted on reforming the method of fining since January, when an accident in the Sago mine in West Virginia trapped 13 miners underground for more than 40 hours, with only one miner found alive at the end of the ordeal.

In 2005 MSHA cited Sago for safety violations 208 times. But Democratic Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia said fines as little as \$99 were issued for some "significant and substantial violations."

Others have complained that the fines were too small to persuade the Sago mine to change its behavior.

Debbie Hamner, whose husband, George, died in Sago, told a mine safety panel February 13 that the federal government issued higher fines for Janet Jackson baring her breast at the 2004 Super Bowl than it did for the deaths of 13 Alabama miners in a 2001 accident.

A study by USA Today found that the fine against that mine's operator, Jim Walter Resources, was reduced to \$3,000 from \$435,000.

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