



West Virginia investigator looks northward to Saskatchewan for mine safety



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REGINA (CP) - A recent tragedy averted at a potash mine in Saskatchewan could end up serving as a positive example for officials investigating a coal mining disaster south of the border.

Davitt McAteer, the man appointed to oversee the investigation of the Sago mine explosion that killed 12 men in West Virginia earlier this year, is planning to tour the Mosaic Co. potash mine in Esterhazy, Sask. He is looking for what went right last month when 72 miners there survived a fire.

"I'm of the opinion that we should study the mine safety efforts the world round in order for us to try and pick up any sort of suggestions or ideas for improvements," McAteer told The Canadian Press.

"Some people do things differently, but I'm of the mind that you can get some good ideas from all over the world, so we are keen on having that be part of our process."

Both the fire in Esterhazy and the explosion at Sago generated international attention, but had different impacts on the mining industry.

Esterhazy has been heralded as a textbook example of mine rescue.

When heat from a cutting torch ignited a fire in some plastic piping Jan. 29, the 72 miners on shift were able to retreat to refuge rooms sealed off from the toxic smoke.

It took 30 hours, but all of the miners were brought to the surface without so much as a cough, according to company officials.

However, the explosion at International Coal Group's Sago mine has been described as a tragedy.

One miner died immediately after the Jan. 2 explosion and 11 others succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning. One survived and is recuperating in hospital.

The first rescue team did not enter the Sago mine until 11 hours after the blast. It took 40 hours for the miners to be brought out, according to reports.

Since the Sago explosion, four more workers have died at other West Virginia coal mines.

The situation prompted Gov. Joe Manchin to request all 544 mines in the state conduct safety checks.

McAteer, who was an assistant secretary of labour under former U.S. president Bill Clinton, said he followed the Saskatchewan rescue closely.

"I would be keen to look at the question of communications and location," he said. "I think two of the fundamental things that we need to examine are the ability to communicate and the ability to locate people."

Injury rates in Saskatchewan's mining industry are much lower than for the province's workforce in general, according to figures provided by the Labour Department.

In 2004, fewer than one per cent of mine workers reported being hurt on the job compared with 4.4 per cent of workers in general.

Saskatchewan NDP Premier Lorne Calvert said it was his government that extended the invitation for the tour after meeting with the CEO of Mosaic at company headquarters in Minnesota this week.

The date of the tour has yet to be finalized.

"We will clearly demonstrate the training that has gone into mine safety in our province," Calvert said.

A spokesman for Mosaic, Marshall Hamilton, said the company will co-operate.

"We don't believe that safety is something that you compete with," he said. "Safety is something you share."

There are differences between potash and coal mines, however.

Coal is burned to create heat, meaning it's flammable. Potash, mainly used as an ingredient in fertilizer, doesn't burn.

There are sometimes problems with methane buildup in coal mines, while that is not usually a difficulty potash miners encounter.

It's also easier to set up permanent refuge stations in a potash mine, where the work is all done at roughly the same depth. Coal mines are always dug deeper.

Still, McAteer said there are safety procedures that cross over.

"This is a hole in the ground as all underground mines are," he said. "We still have a problem we need to do something about."

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