

Poison gasses hamper mine rescue

'Odds are long' in saving missing 4 workers, governor says



Jeff Gentner / AP

West Virginia State Police direct traffic at the entrance to Massey Energy's Upper Big Branch Coal Mine on Monday.

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MONTCOAL, W.Va. - A huge underground explosion blamed on methane gas killed 25 coal miners in the worst U.S. mining disaster in more than two decades. Four others were missing Tuesday, their chances of survival dimming as rescuers were held back by poison gases that accumulated near the blast site, about 1.5 miles into the complex.

Rescuers prepared to drill three shafts going down over 1,000 feet each to release methane and carbon monoxide that chased them from the mine after the blast Monday afternoon, Gov. Joe Manchin said.

The explosion rocked Massey Energy Co.'s sprawling Upper Big Branch mine, about 30 miles south of Charleston, West Virginia, which has a history of violations for not properly ventilating the highly combustible methane, safety officials said.

Manchin said at an early morning news briefing that while drilling on at least one of the three holes was slated to begin soon, it would take perhaps 12 hours before the drilling was complete and rescue teams could be sure of their safety in the mine, meaning the search wasn't expected to resume before 6 p.m.

"It's going to be a long day and we're not going to have a lot of information until we can get the first hole through," Manchin said.

The drills need to bore through about 1,100 feet of earth and rock, he said.

"All we have left is hope, and we're going to continue to do what we can," Kevin Stricklin, an administrator for the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration, said at a news conference. "But I'm just trying to be honest with everybody and say that the situation does look dire."

"The odds are long against us, it's tough," Manchin said earlier on NBC's TODAY Show.

Two miners who were on a vehicle taking them out of the shaft survived the blast, Manchin said. The other seven miners on the vehicle died, he said.

A statement on the Massey Energy Company's Web site confirmed that two miners were taken to hospitals.

According to rescue workers, the force of the explosion was so great that some railroad tracks were "twisted like pretzels," Manchin said.

'Heartbroken'

Stricklin said officials had hoped some of the missing survived the initial blast Monday afternoon and were able to reach airtight chambers stocked with food, water and enough oxygen for them to live for four days. However, rescue teams checked one of two nearby and it was empty. The buildup of toxic methane gas — a constant problem at the mine — and of carbon monoxide prevented teams from reaching other chambers, officials said.

A total of 29 miners were in the area during a shift change when the blast happened, Stricklin said. Some may have died in the blast and others when they breathed in the gas-filled air, he said.

"Everybody's just heartbroken over this and the impact on these families," said mine safety director Joe Main, who planned to go to West Virginia.

State mining director Ron Wooten said though the situation does not seem promising, rescuers weren't done.

"We haven't given up hope at all," he said.

It is the largest number of people killed in a U.S. mine since 1984, when 27 died in a fire at Emery Mining Corp.'s mine in Orangeville, Utah. If the four missing bring the total to 29, it would be the most killed in a U.S. mine since a 1970 explosion killed 38 at Finley Coal Co., in Hyden, Kentucky.

After a record low 34 deaths last year, Main said he and others believed coal mining had turned the corner on preventing fatal accidents.

"There's always danger. There's so many ways you can get hurt, or your life taken," said Gary Williams, a miner and pastor of a church near the southern West Virginia mine. "It's not something you dread every day, but there's always that danger. But for this area, it's the only way you're going to make a living."

Killed 5 weeks from retirement

Benny R. Willingham, 62, who was five weeks away from retiring, was among those who perished, said his sister-in-law Sheila Prillaman.

He had mined for 30 years, the last 17 with Massey, and planned to take his wife on a cruise to the Virgin Islands next month, she said.

"Benny was the type — he probably wouldn't have stayed retired long," Prillaman said. "He wasn't much of a homebody."

Prillaman said family members were angry because they learned of Willingham's death after reading it on a list Massey posted, instead of being contacted by the company, which said it wouldn't release names until next of kin were notified.

"The families want closure," Gov. Manchin said at an earlier press conference. "They want names ... these families are good people. Hard working people. They understand the challenges. Right now I told them to do what they do best. Love each other and come together as a family."

He said some families were hoping for a miracle, and pointed to the 2006 Sago Mine explosion. Crews found miner Randal McCloy Jr. alive after he was trapped for more than 40 hours in atmosphere poisoned with carbon monoxide.

Massey Energy, a publicly traded company based in Richmond, Va., has 2.2 billion tons of coal reserves in southern West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, southwest Virginia and Tennessee, according to the company's Web site. It ranks among the nation's top five coal producers and is among the industry's most profitable. It has a spotty safety record.

