

Drilling delay slows mine rescue effort

'Odds are long' in saving 4 still underground, governor says

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Matt Sullivan / Getty Images

Signs like this one have sprung up around Montcoal, W.Va., after Monday's deadly mine blast.

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MONTCOAL, W.Va. - Efforts to save four miners trapped inside a coal mine where 25 others died Monday were dealt a setback on Tuesday when poison gases kept rescuers away and drilling work was taking longer than expected.

Crews are having to bulldoze an access road above the mine so they can begin drilling three shafts, each more than 1,000 feet long, to release methane and carbon monoxide that chased rescuers from the mine after the blast Monday afternoon, Gov. Joe Manchin said at a news briefing Tuesday.

Officials initially hoped the first drill could be in within 12 hours, but Manchin later said it now looked like it would not be complete until Wednesday evening.

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

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

The huge underground explosion Monday afternoon instantly killed 25 coal miners at Massey Energy Co.'s Upper Big Branch mine — the worst U.S. mining disaster since 1984.

"Before you knew it, it was just like your ears stopped up, you couldn't hear and the next thing you know, it's just like you're just right in the middle of a tornado," miner Steve Smith, who heard the explosion but was able to escape, told ABC's "Good Morning America."

The mine, located about 30 miles south of Charleston, has a history of violations for not properly ventilating the highly combustible methane, safety officials said.

At least two survivors

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'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.

President Barack Obama offered his condolences at an Easter prayer breakfast in Washington on Tuesday and said the federal government is ready to assist with whatever the state needs.

He asked those in the audience to pray for "those who have been lost in this tragic accident" and said he hopes their families can "find comfort in the hard days ahead."

'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.



25 dead, 4 missing

April 6: NBC's Ron Mott reports on the efforts to find any survivors.

Today show

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.

It is the largest number of people killed in a U.S. mine since 1984, when 27 died in a fire at a 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 1972 fire killed 91 in Kellogg, Idaho.



'Prayers are what we need'



April 6: West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin tells TODAY that "the odds are long".

Today show

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."

Massey criticized by families

Some grieving relatives were angry because they found out their loved ones were among the dead from government officials or a company Web site, not from Massey Energy executives.

"They're supposed to be a big company," said Michelle McKinney, who found out from a local official at a nearby school that her 62-year-old father, Benny Willingham, died in the blast. "These guys, they took a chance every day to work and make them big. And they couldn't even call us."

McKinney said her husband is a miner too and her 16-year-old son doesn't want him to go back to work.

Willingham, who had mined for 30 years, the last 17 with Massey, was just five weeks from retiring and planned to take his wife on a cruise to the Virgin Islands next month.

Three members of the same family were also among the dead. Diana Davis said her husband, Timmy Davis, 51, died in the explosion along with his nephews, Josh Napper, 27, and Cory Davis, 20.

The elder Davis' son, Timmy Davis Jr., said his brother, Cody Davis, and an uncle, Tommy Davis, were also at the mine at the time and survived the blast. He said his brother was taking it particularly hard because he and their father were best friends.

Timmy Davis Jr. described his dad as passionate about the outdoors and the mines.

"He loved to work underground," the younger Davis said. "He loved that place."

"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. It ranks among the nation's top five coal producers and is among the industry's most profitable.

Massey said on its Web site that its accident rate fell to an all-time low for the company in 2009. It said its safety record last year was stronger than the industry average for the sixth consecutive year.

But according to federal records, the Upper Big Branch mine has had three fatalities since 1998 and has a worse than average injury rate over the last 10 years. Two of the miners died in roof collapses in 1998 and 2001, while a third was electrocuted in 2003 when repairing an underground car.

Ellen Smith, the editor of Mine Safety and Health News, said the Upper Big Branch mine had been repeatedly cited for safety violations going back years and continuing this year.

In the past year, federal inspectors fined the company more than \$382,000 for repeated serious violations involving its ventilation plan and equipment at Upper Big Branch. The violations also cover failing to follow the plan, allowing combustible coal dust to pile up, and having improper firefighting equipment.

The mine, which employs just over 200 people, uses the "longwall mining" method to tear coal from a lengthy face, leading the ground behind it to collapse. Critics say the method can cause surface subsidence and damage to buildings.

Fans used to remove methane

Methane is one of the great dangers of coal mining, and federal records say the Eagle coal seam releases up to 2 million cubic feet of methane gas into the Upper Big Branch mine every 24 hours, which is a large amount, said Dennis O'Dell, health and safety director for the United Mine Workers labor union.

In mines, giant fans are used to keep the colorless, odorless gas concentrations below certain levels. If concentrations are allowed to build up, the gas can explode with a spark roughly similar to the static charge

created by walking across a carpet in winter, as at the Sago mine, also in West Virginia, where 12 were killed in 2006.

Since then, federal and state regulators have required mine operators to store extra oxygen supplies. Upper Big Branch uses containers that can generate about an hour of breathable air, and all miners carry a container on their belts besides the stockpiles inside the mine.

Rescuers trying to reach the trapped miners had found evidence that some workers took emergency oxygen supplies from a cache in the mine, Stricklin said.

West Virginia also requires all underground mines to have wireless communications and tracking systems designed to survive explosions and other disasters. However, Stricklin said much of the network near the missing men was likely destroyed in the explosion.