



The

MOUNTAIN EAGLE

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MESA seals Scotia mine indefinitely

The bodies of 11 men, killed March 11 in a second methane gas explosion at Scotia Coal Company's bottom mine, are being sealed within the mine, at the mouth of the dangerous 2-Southeast section where they were found.

Kent Frizzell, U.S. Undersecretary of the Interior, announced Saturday that the "gassy" mine would be sealed for two or three months, or until it is considered safe. The announcement followed a conference among officials of the coal company, the state Department of Mines and Minerals, the federal Mining Enforcement and Safety Administration (MESA) and a representative of the Scotia miners' union.

The 11 dead were part of a crew that had been sent two-and-a-half miles into the mine to start repairs on tunnel roofs damaged in a March 9 methane explosion that killed 15 miners in the 2-Southeast section.

The bodies of the 11 were located March 12 by rescue teams, but the risk to the rescuers of removing the corpses was considered prohibitive. No one wanted to try to second-guess the mine that had exploded twice.

The sealing operation involves closing off the mine's seven portals and seven "bore hole"

shafts drilled from the surface to the underground tunnels. The sealing will probably be completed sometime this week end, according to MESA officials.

The 14 mine openings will be closed with airtight concrete walls. This operation will extinguish any fires within the mine by cutting off oxygen, will allow methane to accumulate to non-combustible levels and will allow spark-releasing batteries to run down. (Methane concentrations above a 15 per cent level is no longer explosive, essentially because there is no longer enough oxygen in the atmosphere.)

Copper pipes will be run inside the mine during the sealing process to sample the air within. MESA administrator Robert Barrett said. The air will be tested for carbon monoxide, methane and oxygen to determine when the mine can be reopened.

The Scotia company, a subsidiary of the Blue Diamond Coal Co. headquartered in Knoxville, Tenn., is planning to start production again this week at its two other mines in Black Mountain. MESA officials, however, are expected to conduct an unusually comprehensive inspection of the two mines that could delay production operations.

MESA officials have discounted fears that crevices, formed in the roof of the bottom mine during the explosions, could lead from the methane-filled bottom mine to the

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Here is a list of the 11 men killed in the Thursday explosion:

James O. Williams, 23, Hindman
Don Creech, Sr., 30, Cumberland
J.B. Holbrook, 43, Millstone
John Hackworth, 29, Cumberland
Don Polly, 46, Mayking
Monroe Sturgill, 40, Whitesburg
James Sturgill, 48, Eolia
Glenn Barker, 29, Partridge

FEDERAL MINE INSPECTORS
Kenneth Kiser, Coeburn, Va.
Richard Sammons, Auxler, Ky.
Grover Tussey, Allen, Ky.



THE SCOTIA BOTTOM MINE, where 11 bodies still lie, will be sealed indefinitely. That was the announcement made Saturday afternoon by Kent Frizzell, U.S. Undersecretary of the Interior at a press conference at the Scotia mine. The announcement followed a conference of officials

from the federal Mining Enforcement and Safety Administration [MESA], coal company officials, state mining officials and a representative of the Scotia miners' union. Robert Barrett, MESA administrator, is pictured to the right of Frizzell and Dave McKnight, Scotia union president, to the left.

Investigation launched

The Mining Enforcement and Safety Administration (MESA) is conducting a formal investigation into the Scotia mine disaster to see whether criminal negligence is involved.

Special investigators for MESA are in Letcher County this week to talk with persons who may have knowledge of the mine and events

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Hearings on blasts

Two federal government hearings, one by the Senate and one by the Interior Department, have been scheduled to investigate the circumstances surrounding the two explosions that killed 26 men at the Scotia mine in Oven Fork last week. The Senate will hold two days of hearings next week in Washington, D.C.; the Interior Department will hold its public hearing April 4 and 5 in Whitesburg.

Sen. Harrison Williams, D-N.J., chairman of the Senate Labor and Public Works Committee, said a preliminary investigation "reveals the same pattern of noncompliance with safety regulations" pre-

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Chronicle of tragedy

We went to press last week reporting the worst coal mine disaster in Letcher County history. Fifteen miners were dead, victims of a violent explosion that rocked Scotia Coal Company's Imboden Seam Mine at Oven Fork on the morning of March 9.

At the time, it did not seem as though the news a week later could be worse. There would be private grief and public sorrow, funerals and press conferences, investigations and explanations, promises of aid and pledges that this must never happen again.

But the news this week is worse. On the evening of March 11, only 42 hours after rescue crews had brought the bodies from the mine, a second explosion erupted, trapping a 13-man work crew nearly two and a half miles inside the mine. Eleven—three federal mine inspectors and eight Scotia employees—died instantly. Two survived, stunned by the concussion of the explosion but otherwise unhurt.

The shock waves of the second tragedy are still spreading as we go to press. The mine is being sealed, its latest victims still inside. Investigations are under way by state and federal mine enforcement agencies, two Congressional committees, and the United Mine Workers.

The Interior Department, promising "the most

thorough and comprehensive investigation in the history of mine disasters," has scheduled a hearing for April 5-6 in Whitesburg. The Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee, deploring "this tragic and intolerable carnage," will hold hearings of its own in Washington next week, and the House Education and Labor Committee, chaired by Rep. Carl D. Perkins of Kentucky, is expected to follow suit.

A mine disaster leaves more than one kind of wreckage in its wake. The mine itself is a shambles, a black pit of debris in total disarray, its atmosphere a lethal mixture of gases too poisonous to breathe and all too ready to ignite again. Outside, lives are disrupted and families shattered. The reputations of veteran federal mine enforcement officials are under a cloud of suspicion that their rescue and recovery operation was badly botched. Facts are in fragments, hard to come by and even harder to piece together.

In the time available, The Mountain Eagle has interviewed more than a score of Scotia miners, mine rescue team members, federal and state enforcement officials and investigators, and representatives of miners' unions. (Company officials refused to be interviewed.) From these interviews and from a review of the mine's safety

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