

Remarks of
Joseph A. Main, Assistant Secretary of Labor
for Mine Safety and Health
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Workplace Emergency Management
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Thank you, Deputy Administrator Sun Huashan [*son hwa-hsan*], for that kind introduction. I am happy to be here with you to continue the close and valuable cooperation between our two countries on mine rescue and other safety and health issues. The United States government – and I personally – value the opportunity to attend this important event hosted by the State Administration of Work Safety (SAWS).

I want to thank Minister Luo Lin [*lwo lin*] for hosting this conference and offering me his kind invitation to speak. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge Vice Ministers Wang Dexue [*wong de-hsue*] and IMRB Secretary General Alex Gryska.

I am also honored to share this stage with former SAWS Administrator Wang Xianzheng [*wong hsian-cheng*]. Mr. Wang, it is under your leadership that the United States and China began an exchange program on mine safety and health in 2002. And you signed a historical memorandum of understanding that led to a decade-long friendship and collaboration between our two countries. The miners in China and the United States are grateful for your leadership and vision. And I am pleased to see Deputy Administrator for Coal Mine Safety Wang Shuhe [*wong shoo-her*], who led the first SAWS delegation to visit the United States under the exchange program and to observe the U.S. national mine rescue contest in Reno in August 2002.

I believe in international cooperation on worker safety and health issues. Through information sharing and exchange regarding effective enforcement strategies, improved legal and regulatory framework and the latest technology, countries can learn from each other and benefit from each other's new discoveries or lessons learned. We safety and health professionals and regulators share a common and noble responsibility: to return every worker to his or her loved ones at the end of every shift. To that end, we have gathered here to “cherish life, work hand-in-hand to build a better future” for our workers.

The goal of worker protection transcends geographic, political, and social boundaries. The loss of a worker's life in any country, under any stage of economic development, and in any political and social environment, *is* one too many.

Let me outline what the United States is doing to protect our miners. The safety and health of those who work in mines throughout the United States is of great concern to President Obama, Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis, and myself. Secretary Solis has articulated a forward-looking vision of assuring "good jobs" for every worker in the United States, which includes safe and healthy workplaces, particularly in high-risk industries, and a voice in the workplace for workers as critical elements of a "good job." We at MSHA are guided by these principles.

President Obama has made clear his strong commitment to mine safety and health. After the tragedy at the Upper Big Branch Mine in April of 2010, the President said of the of the Upper Big Branch miners, "We owe them more than prayers. We owe them action. We owe them accountability. We owe them an assurance that when they go to work every day, when they enter that dark mine, they are not alone. They ought to know that behind them there is a company that's doing what it takes to protect them, and a government that is looking out for their safety." The President's words are my mandate, the mandate of MSHA, and should be the mandate of the U.S. mining industry. I believe the principles embodied in these words should be the mandate of the mining industry across the globe.

And speaking of the Upper Big Branch mine, our investigation into that accident is nearly complete. We are learning more about how to prevent those types of disasters in the future.

My determination – my passion – to improve mine safety and health stems from the fact that I have been involved in mining since I was 18. I deeply respect those who choose mining as a career. I understand the critical importance of our collective responsibility to ensure that effective health and safety standards are in place and followed to prevent injury, illnesses and death. My goal is to ensure that no family suffers the terrible loss of an irreplaceable loved one. I know that every mine safety and health professional here today – and every mine safety and health professional around the world – shares that heartfelt goal.

MSHA takes a holistic approach to mine safety and health. Keeping miners safe and healthy in the mining workplace is not only about making sure we can rescue them in emergencies, but preventing emergencies – accidents and illness – in the first place. Prevention is where our focus is in the United States, and it is the goal of MSHA. When we stop accidents before they happen, we can focus more on keeping miners safe and healthy, and making sure that mines stay safe and healthful places to work.

We at MSHA have instituted a number of activities to promote prevention of accidents and ensure that the laws, rules and regulations governing mine safety and health are followed by mine operators and owners. After the coal mine explosion and mine fire tragedies in 2006 at the Sago, Darby and Aracoma mines, our Congress passed a new law governing mine safety called the MINER Act. We have put into place the requirements mandated in that law, including requirements for mine emergency response plans, mandatory mine communication systems to track miners during emergencies, and refuge chambers for them to shelter in to if they cannot

escape during emergencies. The new law had other provisions governing mine rescue teams, penalties against mine operators who violate the laws, and regulations regarding safety issues in the mines. In addition, we have initiated outreach and education programs to make miners and operators aware of commonly-violated standards and rules. We have put into place a comprehensive initiative to end black lung disease that includes education, outreach, and stringent enforcement, as well as putting forth new regulations on permissible coal dust exposure limits. We have also instituted impact inspections of mines that have a history of non-compliance with the laws, rules and regulations, as well as mines who have compliance problems as indicated by their injury patterns and history of citations for violating regulations. In addition, we have begun a concentrated outreach effort to ensure that miners in the United States understand and know how to exercise the workplace protections and rights they are given under the laws.

In other words, our approach to mine safety and health embraces both the miner and the mine operator – ensuring they are trained, educated in what the law requires, and understand the consequences of noncompliance. We need the cooperation and commitment of everyone in the mining industry to provide a safe and healthful workplace for miners.

We also need to be sure that the system of mine rescue works and works effectively. One of my first actions as Assistant Secretary at MSHA was to direct a review of our readiness for mine emergencies. We have been conducting comprehensive mine emergency gap analysis of MSHA, industry, states, and mine rescue teams to examine the mine rescue system for weaknesses or “gaps,” so that we could work to make it better. We are looking specifically at the things that don’t go right during a mine rescue. What do we need to do to be better prepared?

Next year, we will hold a mine rescue summit to address the findings of our meetings with our stakeholders and the analysis of the gaps in our capabilities. We will review improvements, and we will set a path forward to improve mine emergency response in the U.S. We are looking at international experiences to help us learn as well.

Mining is critical to the current global economy, especially to countries such as China and the United States, two of the world's largest producers of coal. Both of our countries also produce a wide variety of other important minerals. I know that we share similar goals on mine safety and health issues.

The United States Department of Labor and SAWS have conducted important bilateral exchanges and cooperation on work safety since 2002. The U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration welcomed a Chinese delegation in August 2002 at the Reno U.S. national and international mine rescue contest. That visit by SAWS marked the beginning of a lasting friendship between SAWS and USDOL. Next year will mark the tenth anniversary of the U.S.-China bilateral cooperation on mine safety and health. As we reflect on our cooperation over the years, both of our countries have endured tragedies, setback and losses – but we have also made much progress in making mines safer and more healthful workplaces. One thing is clear: our joint efforts saved thousands of lives and have prevented or reduced workplace injuries both in China and in the United States.

China's mining industry has made great strides in recent years, with advanced technology and highly professional and well-trained mine rescue teams that show your deep commitment to the safety and health of your miners. We know you have the ability to keep your miners safe and healthy in the mines, and I believe we have much to learn from each other about improving safety and health in our mines.

Let me conclude by sharing what the mining community in the United States has learned over the last century. Mining coal safely will result in more production. Safe, healthy and happy miners who have a voice in the workplace will produce more coal. For any country to become a competitive supplier of coal in the world marketplace, it must first ensure that its miners are as safe and healthy as they can possibly be. Investing in prevention, investing in the safety and health of your miners, and investing in advanced technology to protect our miners will reap mining industry significant profits indeed. And it is the right thing to do.

Once again, I thank you for your time and attention today. I am delighted to be here, and am looking forward to a mutually interesting and beneficial exchange. Thank you.