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Crandall Canyon: Photos paint a grim picture

One depicts damage from a March jolt not reported to MSHA

By Robert Gherke
The Salt Lake Tribune

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A series of photographs from inside the Crandall Canyon mine paint the most chilling, vivid picture to date of the force that was unleashed underground.

One, in particular, shows the damage done by an earlier jolt inside the mine that was never reported to the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and raises anew questions about the safety of the work leading up to the Aug. 6 collapse that entombed six miners.

The pictures were part of a presentation by Richard Gates, the head of the MSHA team investigating the Crandall Canyon disaster, to the Utah Mine Safety Commission on Tuesday.

Taken in September, one photo shows the long, heavy roof bolts, about an inch in diameter, protruding from the roof, bent at 90-degree angles like cheap nails misstruck with a hammer. Another shows a sizable

continuous mining machine used in the rescue effort almost completely buried by the Aug. 16 collapse that killed three miners and injured six.

A third shows the hydraulic water jacks used to support the roof, pushed like aluminum cans into the tunnels by debris that burst from the walls that day.

If there was any question about the power of a mine bounce - created when the immense pressures on the coal pillars supporting the roof cause coal to blow out of the walls or fall from the roof - the photographs of the Crandall Canyon aftermath put them to rest.

The photograph taken after a March 10 bounce shows heaping piles of coal blocking nearly the entire passageway and was taken by UtahAmerican Energy Inc., the mine operator, after a significant amount of debris had already been hauled away, Gates said.

The company never reported the March event to MSHA. Instead it abandoned its work carving away the thick north barrier, which helps support the mine, and moved to the south barrier. The March bounce occurred about 900 feet from where miners were working at the time of the Aug. 6 collapse.

Gates said investigators are looking at the March event, as well as other events that preceded the Aug. 6 collapse, "trying to get a better feel for the history of the mine."

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Gates showed families of the miners killed inside Crandall Canyon the same presentation earlier this month and the photographs left a stark impression, said Ed Havas, an attorney representing several family members.

"I think the thing that they reacted to most is seeing the damage that had been done in March in the north barrier," Havas said. "We didn't talk about it at any length, but I'm pretty sure the reaction to that is: 'Having seen that happen in the north barrier in March, what were they doing continuing with the same mine plan?' "

Kevin Stricklin, MSHA's administrator of coal mine safety, saw the picture for the first time last week when he was given a draft of Gates' slideshow.

"It looked pretty extensive, and based on the fact that they had cleaned some of it up it just reiterated that point," he said. It was information that the agency would like to have had when it was being asked to consider the retreat mining plan for the south barrier.

If MSHA had the information from the March bump, the agency could have given added scrutiny to the plan to mine in the south barrier, said Pat McGinley, a law professor at the University of West Virginia.

"Given the appearance of the mine entries in the photo . . . it was only by the grace of God that fatalities or injuries did not occur

as a result of the earlier mine engineering errors," he said.

The company has said that it responded to the March event appropriately. A Bureau of Land Management inspector, Stephen Falk, was in the mine on March 12. He reported that the coal that burst from the pillars had filled tunnels for nearly 200 feet and walls designed to separate the tunnels that circulated air had been damaged for roughly 1,000 feet.

The company decided to abandon mining in the north barrier and, on the advice of a consultant, decided to try mining the south barrier using larger pillars.

The six miners were cutting away the coal in those pillars when the mine collapsed on Aug. 6, about 900 feet from where the bounce occurred in March.

"You would've thought they would've thought twice about that," Havas said. "That should've been a red flag."

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The Crandall Canyon mine tunnel where three rescuers were killed Aug. 16 is littered with chunks of coal that shot out of the mine wall, along with steel and wooden roof support beams, wire mesh fencing and other debris. (Photo courtesy of the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration.)



A slab of white sandstone, which used to be above the Crandall Canyon mine's coal seam, pushed down with great force on the wire-mesh fencing that helped hold up the tunnel roof. (Photo courtesy of the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration.)



A bump in the Crandall Canyon mine in March filled passageways with mounds of coal and did extensive damage to the mine. This photo was taken by the company after a significant amount of material had already been removed, but it shows the extent of the destruction in the mine. The event was never reported to mine safety officials and a similar event in August killed six miners. The jolt to the mine is part of the Mine Safety and Health Administration's investigation, officials said this week. (Photo courtesy MSHA)

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