

# The Salt Lake Tribune

## Crandall Canyon Disaster: Feds turn over mine probe data, photos

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The Salt Lake Tribune

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Federal mine safety officials came to their first formal meeting with the state Tuesday loaded with information about the investigation into the Crandall Canyon mine disaster in August and their agency's broader responses to fallout from the tragedy.

They also brought photos.

Those photographs showed the destruction within the mine tunnel where three rescuers died Aug. 16 while trying to rescue six miners fatally trapped 10 days earlier by a much larger implosion of Crandall Canyon's walls.

Only the bumper of the continuous mining machine being used to excavate a path to the trapped six was visible through splintered chunks of coal piled deep in the tunnel. Strewn about the rubble were twisted pieces of the steel roof supports that had been blown free like pickup sticks when the mine's walls came in, devastating the rescuers and the underground relief effort.

Those images, provided by Richard Gates, head of the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration team investigating Crandall Canyon, clearly illustrated that more lives easily could have been lost in the disaster. And that reinforced to Utah Mine Safety Commission members the need to come up with some substantive recommendations to help the state try to assure that nothing of the kind happens again in its coal mines.

Gates was hesitant to make any recommendations on what the state should do, pending the completion of his team's investigation. Consequently, he never came close to shedding light on his suspicions about what might have been the root cause or causes of what happened at Crandall Canyon. He was even reluctant to give an anticipated completion date for his report, offering only that he did not expect it to take quite as long as the probe into the Sago mine disaster in West Virginia.

That report took nearly a year and a half to finish. But the Sago investigation required lengthy scientific analyses of lightning and its effect on the pressure resistance capacity of underground seals that keep fresh air from mixing with deadly air.

The Crandall Canyon probe will not have such technical demands.

Investigators also will not come close to getting into the area where the missing miners were working. Members of

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Gates' team made two forays into the mine in mid-September, advancing to the scene of the implosion that killed the rescue workers. Company officials accompanied them part of the way, Gates said, but declined to go the last half-mile up to the working face.

And now the mine's three entry tunnels have been sealed with cinder block walls, indicating there are no imminent plans to return to the area where the miners are entombed. But, MSHA coal mine safety director Kevin Stricklin added, those walls can be removed if future innovations allow a safe return to retrieve the bodies.

With limited on-site inspection possibilities, Gates said his team has conducted formal, yet voluntary, interviews with 63 people knowledgeable about the mine and plans for it, including MSHA personnel in the Price field office and Denver district headquarters, and miners who worked there. More interviews are planned.

U.S. Department of Labor attorney Ed Clair said overtures have been made to talk with Robert Murray, the mine's co-owner, but nothing definite has been set. Murray was subpoenaed last week by a Senate committee also eager to question him about the disaster.

Gates also said he has not yet interviewed any officials with Agapito Associates Inc., the Grand Junction, Colo.-based engineering and mine-planning consultants who did the

technical work behind UtahAmerican Energy's plan, approved by MSHA, to cut most of the coal out of the barrier pillars holding up the mountain above the section of the Crandall Canyon mine where the first catastrophic collapse occurred.

But he added that Agapito has supplied investigators with numerous requested documents. Agapito's documents are among 35,000 pages of materials, 250 maps, 1,200 pictures, and hours of video and audio recordings that the investigative team has assembled and continues to analyze.

"We're still requesting more from the company and consultants," Gates said.

Utah Labor Commissioner Sherrie Hayashi, the state's appointed representative on MSHA's investigative team, said she thought one recommendation the Utah Mine Safety Commission could make was for legislation that would automatically make a Labor Commission executive the state's liaison to rescue operations in any future mining disaster.

She and Stricklin also said there is always a need for more training, and Stricklin said MSHA has no problems with Utah re-establishing its own mine-inspection agency, describing what some other states do. But he noted that would require a financial investment.

The Price field office costs about \$1.8

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million annually to run, he said.

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