


GAO
 Accountability • Integrity • Reliability
Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-945](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Despite a drop in injury and fatality rates since the formation of the Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), mining is still a dangerous industry.

Focusing on underground coal mines, GAO assessed how well MSHA oversees its process for reviewing and approving critical types of mine plans and the extent to which MSHA's inspections and accident investigations processes help ensure the safety and health of underground coal miners.

What GAO Recommends

In order to provide better oversight over its operations, GAO recommends that the Assistant Secretary for Mine Safety and Health

- monitor the timeliness of technical inspections conducted as part of the 6-month review of certain mine plans,
- ensure that mine operators are correcting hazards identified during inspections in a timely manner,
- develop a plan for addressing anticipated shortages in the number of qualified inspectors due to upcoming retirements, and
- revise the systems used to collect information on accidents and investigations.

In its comments on the report, MSHA did not comment on our recommendations but disagreed with many of the findings on which the recommendations are based.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-945.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Bob Robertson at (202) 512-9889, robertsonr@gao.gov.

MINE SAFETY

MSHA Devotes Substantial Effort to Ensuring the Safety and Health of Coal Miners, but Its Programs Could Be Strengthened

What GAO Found

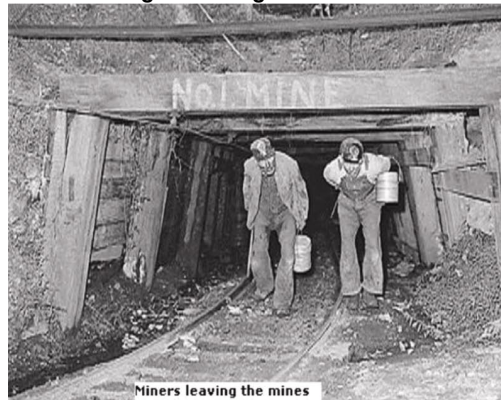
To help ensure the safety and health of underground coal miners, MSHA staff review and approve mine plans, conduct inspections, and investigate serious accidents. In these three areas, GAO found that MSHA has extensive procedures and qualified staff. However, MSHA can improve its oversight, guidance, and human capital planning efforts.

MSHA is not effectively monitoring a few key areas. MSHA headquarters does not ensure that 6-month technical inspections of ventilation and roof support plans are being completed in a timely fashion. This may lead to mines operating without up-to-date plans or mine operators not following all requirements of the plans. Additionally, MSHA officials do not always ensure that hazards found during inspections are corrected promptly. Gaps were found in the information that MSHA uses to monitor fatal and nonfatal injuries, limiting trend analysis and agency oversight. Specifically, the agency does not collect information on hours worked by independent contractor staff needed to compute fatality and nonfatal injury rates for specific mines, and it is difficult to link information on accidents at underground coal mines with MSHA's investigations.

Guidance provided by MSHA management to agency employees could be strengthened. Some inspection procedures are unclear and are contained in many sources, leading to differing interpretations by mine inspectors. The guidance on coordinating inspections conducted by specialists and regular inspectors is also unclear, resulting in some duplication of effort.

Finally, although about 44 percent of MSHA's underground coal mine inspectors will be eligible to retire in the next 5 years, the agency has no plan for replacing them or using other human capital flexibilities available to the agency to retain its highly qualified and trained inspectors. The potential shortage of inspectors may limit MSHA's ability to ensure the safety and health of underground coal miners.

Miners Exiting an Underground Coal Mine



Source: Mine Safety and Health 2000 calendar.