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Two years after UBB tragedy, Alpha Natural to board up coal mine for good

By: Matthew Hill

Published: 5th April 2012



TORONTO (miningweekly.com) – On the eve of the second anniversary of the Upper Big Branch coal disaster that left 29 miners dead, Alpha Natural Resources, the third-biggest US coal producer by sales, said it will not reopen the operation.

Alpha bought the mine, which has been idled since the accident, through its \$7.1-billion purchase of Massey Energy in June last year.

"Though two years have passed, everyone still has vivid memories of the tragedy and the suffering the miners' families endured," CEO **Kevin Crutchfield** said in a press release.

Alpha said it will permanently seal the portals that allow entry to the mine with concrete barriers, and will reclaim the areas surrounding them.

The April 5, 2010 explosion at Upper Big Branch was the worst accident of its kind since a 1984 disaster at a Utah mine, and last month former superintendent at the mine, **Gary May** pleaded guilty to fraud, for hiding safety infractions from government inspectors before the blast.

Alpha Natural in December last year reached a \$210-million agreement with the US Department of Justice over the disaster, which saw the company pay \$46.5-million to families of the fallen miners and \$34.8-million in fines for safety violations.

The company also agreed at the time to invest \$80-million over two years to improve safety at its former Massey mines.

"While we wish this tragedy had never happened, we are committed to doing our part in helping the coal industry continuously improve its safety performance," Crutchfield said.

On March 13, Zurich-based RepRisk ranked Alpha Natural as the most controversial mining company measured against the United Nations Global Compact principles "and other international standards", mainly citing the company's Massey purchase as the reason behind the title.

"I will never forget the 29 men who perished in an explosion that ripped through the mine, or the two miners who were seriously injured, or their loved ones," US Secretary of Labor **Hilda Solis** said in a statement.

The mine has remained closed since the accident, though then Massey CEO **Don Blankenship** had said in July 2010 it was considering "possible alternatives that may allow us to access the coal reserves in the mine and the coal seam". Blankenship has since retired and moved away from West Virginia, according to media reports.

Alpha Natural's decision to permanently shutter Upper Big Branch comes against a backdrop of an industry battling against falling demand for coal burn in power stations, as utilities switch to cheaper natural gas.

The NYSE-listed company said in February it would cut coal production by around four-million tons this year because of softer demand, joining other US producers such as Consol Energy, Arch Coal and Patriot Coal.

The Upper Big Branch mine produced 1.2-million tons of high volatility metallurgical coal in 2009, and had forecast output of 1.6-million tons in 2010, before the disaster.

6/8/12

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