
EDUCATION & LABOR COMMITTEE

Congressman George Miller, Chairman

Monday, May 24, 2010
Press Office, 202-226-0853

Chairman Miller Statement at Committee Hearing On “The Upper Big Branch Mine Tragedy: Testimony of Family Members”

WASHINGTON, D.C. – *Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, for a committee hearing on “The Upper Big Branch Mine Tragedy: Testimony of Family Members”*

Good morning. I would like to welcome everyone to today’s hearing on the Upper Big Branch Mine tragedy. The Education and Labor Committee has traveled to Beckley, West Virginia to hear from families who are grieving and looking for answers to our nation’s most devastating mine tragedy in forty years.

Just a few weeks ago, Americans were once again transfixed on an unfolding tragedy at a coal mine, while rescuers worked heroically to find miners who we all hoped were still alive. On April 5, a massive explosion on a scale that is nearly incomprehensible ripped through the Upper Big Branch Mine.

Our nation hoped and prayed that early reports of four unaccounted miners indicated that there might be survivors. But, sadly, these hopes faded. Twenty-nine coal miners died that day. More importantly, this community lost husbands, fathers, sons, and best friends.

On behalf of all of my colleagues, I want to express our deepest sympathies to each of you and your families. Our thoughts continue to be with you and your communities who have suffered such a big loss.

I know your testimony today will be painful for you to deliver. Nevertheless, your testimony is critical for us to hear. I thank you very much for agreeing to participate in today’s hearing.

I would also like to recognize all of the brave miners involved in the rescue effort. These men and women worked around the clock, day after day. You, too, have the appreciation of this nation for your selfless efforts.

I would also like to extend our gratitude to Governor Joe Manchin and Congressman Nick Rahall, who were on the ground helping families and miners during the rescue efforts.

Secretary Hilda Solis also joins us today. She was also on the ground and met with miners and their families during this ordeal.

I am also grateful for the participation of other members of the West Virginia delegation today -- Congresswoman Shelley Moore Capito, Congressman Alan Mollohan, and Senator Jay Rockefeller. The West Virginia delegation has provided invaluable support to make sure that lessons from this tragedy are not forgotten.

I want you to know that we are all working together on legislation to make sure something like this doesn't happen again.

Today we will hear from a panel of family members about how this tragedy has affected them.

While the cause of this tragedy remains under investigation, the hazards miners face while underground are not a mystery.

We know how coal dust can explode like gunpowder when ignited by methane. We understand the disastrous results when a mine owner operates on the margins of safety in order to put more coal on the belt. We know what happens when workers' voices are silenced by fear of retaliation for speaking out on safety problems they see. And, we know the consequences for safety when an operator games the system in order to escape much tougher safety oversight.

Miners die. That's what happens.

Despite these truths, I am sure that many are skeptical that elected officials have the willingness to do anything about it. There is frustration that as attention to this tragedy fades, mine operators will simply return to business as usual. That no one will be held accountable for the deaths of so many loved ones, and real safety reforms will fall by the wayside again.

I share this concern. I've seen it happen before.

But we cannot succumb to defeatism and cynicism when it comes to the lives of our fellow human beings. I will not.

This committee has heard from too many families over the years who have suffered a great loss, as you have. I made a promise to them and I cannot forget that promise.

I made a pledge to the families of Sago, Aracoma Alma, Darby and Crandall Canyon that we would do everything in our power to uncover the cause of those tragedies, to hold responsible parties accountable, and to prevent other miners from suffering a similar fate.

I extend this same promise to all the families of Upper Big Branch. Your families paid the ultimate price for a job our nation depends on.

Losing a family member to a senseless tragedy could fill you with a sense of powerlessness. However, I have found that in the face of overwhelming tragedy, families display incredible strength and determination.

Coal miners' families helped to provide the final push to give miners a fighting chance after an emergency. As a result, mines must have at least 96 hours of breathable air stockpiled, lifelines, tracking and communications systems installed, and that mine rescue teams be properly trained, equipped and ready to respond. While this was a significant step forward, I felt that we missed an opportunity to do more to protect the health and safety of our nation's miners.

Every day, miners show up for their shift knowing that there is a chance they may not return to their families. Miners for generations have lived with this fear.

But I firmly believe that there are things we can do to ensure that every miner who goes to work is able to return home safely to their families at the end of their shift. Congress has an obligation to make sure that is the case.

And we will.

I thank you all for coming today and look forward to your testimony.

###