

# The Safety Alliance Agreement:



## MSHA's View a Year Later

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**BF:** Our mission — to uphold the highest standards of safety and health in order to prevent injury, illness and death in the mines — is a shared mission between MSHA and our stakeholders: mining companies throughout the country, mine workers, trade associations, labor organizations, state agencies and educational institutions. These represent individuals and groups that have a vested interest in mine safety and health. MSHA's mission also requires us to work closely with the mining community to instill solid safety and health ideals so that miners can continue to return home to their families at the end of every shift. In the end, our mission is about creating a “culture of prevention” against injuries, illnesses and deaths.

To accomplish these goals, we have branched out to create new kinds of partnerships for prevention, all the while striking a balance between enforcement, education and training and technical support, and integrating compliance assistance into each of those elements. It's not a coincidence that MSHA is systematically working through a road map developed two years ago with input from our stakeholders. That roadmap has led to a planned and organized process of change in the safety and health culture within MSHA and that has, in turn, fostered changes throughout the mining industry.

As Assistant Secretary of Labor for Mine Safety and Health Dave Lauriski said of the Alliance in February 2003, “I am especially pleased about this partnership to promote safety and health in the stone, sand and gravel industry. For the first

time ever, MSHA and an industry association have jointly agreed to adopt safety and health performance goals with objective measures. This alone is unprecedented. They obviously see safety as a value.”

Both groups have made tremendous progress in fostering a national dialogue on mine safety and health by sharing information on best practices or effective approaches in eliminating mining hazards. The alliance is conducting this dialogue with others in the mining industry through individual and joint outreach programs. One of these cooperative programs was the second annual “Spring Thaw” Workshops held in 38 states and Puerto Rico from February through March. Workshop leaders, many of whom come from mining operations, discussed mining hazards that are characteristic in certain regions of the country and included best solutions recognized to eliminate those hazards and create a culture of safety within the mining industry.

I believe this joint dialogue has also led to the U.S. mining industry achieving its best safety record since statistics were first compiled in 1910. Fifty-six miners died in mining-related incidents in 2003, versus 67 in 2002 — a decrease of 16 percent. The decline in injury rates has followed the same pattern. And over the past three years deaths have declined at a remarkable 33 percent.

**SS&GR:** *What advice would you give to mining industry leaders to improve their company’s safety performance?*

**BF:** First, I would say: “You are doing many things right, so stay the course. The industry has made great strides, and the declining number of fatal accidents shows your efforts are not in vain. But more can be done.

“If you truly want to improve the safety performance of your organization, begin by making safety a value. As industry principals, you provide leadership, and that leadership will reflect your beliefs and values. Those beliefs have an impact far beyond the walls of your office.

“What is important to you as a leader is important to those who work for you and with you. This industry is blessed with many individuals striving to do a good job. We all want our employers to know we take pride in our work. One way we demonstrate this is to meet or exceed the expectations of our supervisors. If an employee believes that his supervisor equates good performance with safe work practices, he will act accordingly. This is true for all of us, regardless of position or title. “But again, our values are exposed by our actions; few of us act well enough to fake what we value. If you value safety, act on it; demonstrate to your peers that safety is more than a side topic to discuss after production figures, it is a way of life.”

**SS&GR: *What is your advice to safety and health professionals?***

**BF:** We must always remember the human cost and face of fatalities. The decline in mine fatality and injury rates is the result of a number of factors, the most important of which is the emphasis on internal communications. If you expect to make safety the value that determines all of your choices, you must start with your employees.

At MSHA, for example, we have succeeded in making our goals and methods clear to every member of our team — they are the performance measures by which each person is evaluated. We have established a number of health and safety benchmarks for each of our managers to achieve — and then determine their promotions and salaries accordingly. Communicating internally also requires that you get out and talk to your employees in the field. MSHA's top managers are constantly on the move, visiting mines, MSHA field and district offices, workshops, seminars and conferences.

**SS&GR: *The number of fatalities in the aggregates industry dropped to 18 last year, the lowest level ever. This figure continues a downward trend in fatalities over the past few years. Still, we all agree that any fatality is one too many. To what do you attribute this improvement?***

**BF:** Such improvements can be achieved only through dedication, determination and hard work throughout industry, with everyone doing his or her part to reduce fatalities. Such a significant reduction is reached only through daily, diligent attention to safe work practices, thorough training and an ever-widening circle of mining industry stakeholders adopting safety as a personal and organizational value. Along with enforcing the law, MSHA has strengthened education and training, technical support and compliance assistance. Since we've approached a plateau, we have aspired to move the mining industry to the next level in safety and health. Whether you are a mine owner or an equipment operator, a member of a maintenance crew or a foreman, a miner's rep or a safety manager, I challenge you to move to the next level, too.

Here's my vision for mine safety and health performance: I believe that over time we can achieve even greater success in preventing accidents and injuries. One day, maybe soon, we will achieve a full year without a single mining fatality. In the meantime, let's continue our vigilance and commitment to improve our performance.

**SS&GR: *What do you say to an aggregates industry CEO who, for one reason or another, is reluctant to sign the NSSGA Safety Pledge?***

**BF:** As the pledge states, "We will continually enhance management's direct participation and commitment in all aspects of safety and health, specifically that of senior management, production and plant managers, field superintendents and supervisors...."

Management must take an active role in changing the safety culture. Signing the safety pledge is a positive step.

This cultural change applies not just to the mining industry, but to MSHA as well. I have listened to the concerns of my staff, answered questions about where we are headed, and explained our plans to influence the mining industry to eliminate fatalities, injuries and illnesses. We have talked repeatedly about making safety a value in all that we do. I have urged them to ask themselves, "What have I done today to improve safety and health for the miners?" This should be the standard by which we judge all our choices. Throughout this agency, I have noticed how employees readily respond with energy, passion and personal dedication to carry out the agency's mission.

Furthermore, MSHA's employees matter to me personally. They have my deep, personal respect. What we are doing to make MSHA a better-man-aged agency and move to the next level in health and safety involves a process of change, and change can be unsettling. But it has to occur. If we continue to do things the same way, we will get the same results — little or no improvement. The changes we are making are in the best interest of the agency, and they will serve as a catalyst for improved health and safety practices throughout the mining industry.

**SS&GR:** *Considerable publicity has been devoted to the Safety Pledge. But since it is just a means to an end of cutting the injury incidence rate in the aggregates industry, what specific steps, either through the Alliance or apart from it, will be taken to achieve the goal of cutting that rate by 50 percent by 2007?*

**BF:** Entering into an Alliance with NSSGA to promote the safety of the nation's aggregate miners is one of the most significant steps we have taken. MSHA and the mining industry have a record to be proud of, but for MSHA to reduce the incidence rate by half, these collective efforts must continue.

Other steps include:

- Recognizing developing accident trends and providing early responses through development and distribution of hazard specific alerts. We need to stop "bad" trends in their tracks.
- Proper training and education of our miners. We will continue to support state grants for this vital work.
- Continually updating our website ([www.msha.gov](http://www.msha.gov)) with new information and services intended to help promote safety and also to assist with compliance.

- . • Regularly conducting “specialty” workshops, geared toward specific safety and health concerns in all mining sectors.
- . • Supporting new technologies that enhance safety and health for miners. MSHA’s Technical Support branch will continue to provide a wide range of services, from certification and approvals to engineering help in identifying hazards, to better engineering designs that protect miners.
- . • Digitizing abandoned mines maps to prevent a recurrence of the potentially disastrous consequences at the Quecreek coal mine in July 2002. One of the major tools we will use to achieve the 50 percent reduction in the incidence rate by 2007 is flexibility. We will continually evaluate what works and what doesn’t. We will maintain open, meaningful relationships with our stakeholders. Working together with the mining industry, we will strive to seek new and better means to protect our miners. This is an aggressive goal, but an achievable one.

**SS&GR:** *Do you have any other thoughts on safety you’d like to share?*

**BF:** We must always remember the human cost and face of fatalities. While we have made tremendous progress in recent years in reducing fatalities, illnesses and injuries, there is much work left to do to attain our goal of sending every miner home safely at the end of every shift. MSHA cannot do this alone — with assistance from all of our industry partners, safety will become a core value when it is institutionalized at every mine, quarry, plant and mill in America.

