

By Rick Markley

Dave Lauriski, U.S. Labor Department's assistant secretary over the Mine Safety and Health Administration sat down for an exclusive interview with *Rock Products* at the Vibra-Tech/GeoSonics blasting vibration conference held in Key West, Fla. in January. Lauriski was the conference's keynote speaker.

A CONVERSATION WITH DAVE LAURISKI

On the success of his administration

“Over the past three years we've worked very hard to set in place objectives we feel this industry should be achieving. Starting that was probably the most significant thing we did in terms of getting people focused on how to go from where we were in 2000 to where we wanted to be. Fatalities are down 35% in just 2½ years. And that's a pretty remarkable achievement for this industry.

But it wasn't that this agency alone did that. I hope this agency set the tone for the industry to follow. I'd like to believe that when you have three consecutive years of record-low performance that's enough time to validate the process. I'm very proud that this industry chose to move in this direction. I'm very proud and honored that I happened to be here when that progress occurred.

On the future of MSHA

“We can't become comfortable with where we are. It's great that we've made these achievements in fatalities, but by no means should we feel like our work is done. We have 55 people that didn't return home to their families last year. That certainly is 55 too many. It's going to take a lot of hard work to get to our ultimate vision of every miner going home. But I feel we're up to that task. We can build upon the momentum that we have going. I think we can make some great strides in the future.

This coming year we're going to continue some of our focus on outreach work that we did last year. We

need to be a little bit better this coming year in being more on the front side and being a little less reactive than we were last year. We got up to that point at the end of the year. But in mid-year we had a couple of initiatives that were based on trends that we were seeing. We were reactive to those trends. I'd like to see us on the front side and take the initiatives before these things happen. That's one of the things we've talked about with our senior management.

I know that there are still difficulties out there and there probably always will be. Overall, the ability to work with the industry is much improved over what it was a few years ago, and I feel very good about that. It's going to take that kind of partnership and cooperative spirit for us to improve the safety and health performance of the nation's mines.

That's where my focus is going to remain. We're going to continue to work on a balanced approach to this agency to make sure we follow the principals that I believe will make it successful: that of equally allocated enforcement and education and training and technical support.

On human error

“Last year there were some troubling signs that we're going to focus on this year. The kinds of incidents that caused death and injury, the experience of people, the positions that people held were all troubling factors. For example, the kinds of incidents we saw weren't the typical fall

off a highwall. They were more the kind that involved decision making. There were a lot of human factors that went into the incidents that happened last year.

We have to understand why people are making the choices they make. We happen to be at a blasting conference today, and one of the things I mentioned in my speech is that we have a couple of instances that cause concern. One happened in a coal mine where they actually had a shoot go through the coal pillar and kill one young man and injure three others. There were decisions made that should not have been made. Those are the sort of things that concern us.

In some instances we had experienced miners who changed companies and had been at that company for less than a year, which tells me maybe it is a training issue from a task perspective, or understanding that company's culture as opposed to the culture they came from. There are a number of factors that we're trying to jump into now that involve human behavior.

There's some reservation (by) some of the mining community for us to take that step. They view human factors as one that means you are going to have punitive consequences; that's not the case at all. That's not why you do it. You do it to gain an understanding of why people make the choices they make. Often it's not "why did you make a bad choice" but "why did you make a good choice." People make the right choices and you want to understand why they make those right choices and use that information to help others. People make wrong choices and you want to understand why they make those choices and use that information to help others.

It's not a matter of who's going to be held accountable. It's a matter of getting information and using that information so that others don't make the same decisions. That's what the study of behaviors is all about. We're moving in that direction. We'll be looking at root causes, not just of accidents, but hazards or violations that we find; they are all a part of this process.

The other thing that concerns me is that we lost more supervisors last year than we have in a number of years. That tells me that we have supervisors doing work that is not supervisory work. We've got to make sure that if a supervisor is going to perform work that he or she usually doesn't perform, they have the same amount of training as everyone else. We saw this in all sectors. When you start to see this it means we need to refocus our training efforts. It makes us wonder if there is adequate training to go along with the work that is being performed.

Another concern is the fatalities caused when miners are doing construction, repair and maintenance activities. We are working with a group, as part of our alliance agreement with the National Stone, Sand & Gravel Association, that's working on just those issues so we can turn those trends around. We are seeing that maintenance and repair activity as one of the leading causes of incidents in this country.



On the man power and money to train

“I believe we have enough, but (training) adds additional burden. Most of our folks, as they do their inspection work, are already talking to miners and doing some of the things that we're putting an emphasis on. We can't get to a point where all we do are these focused initiatives and not do our mandated activity. We have to figure out how to integrate it into all our activities.

When I came here, we talked about creating an agency that instead of having all the program areas working on their own initiatives, we wanted to collectively work together. So when we undertake these initiatives, it's not just the metal/nonmetal inspecting group that's doing it. It's the inspectors, the supervisors, it's education and training, it's technical support, it's administration who are out there helping one another get these initiatives in place. It involves all 2,300 employees, not just the inspectors.

On incident and injury statistics

“We have had three straight years of record-setting performance from a health and safety perspective, not only fatalities, but also injuries. We're making progress on all fronts. That's not just injury rates, but the more serious injuries. They are all on the declining trend. The percentage drop is not as significant in the injury rate as it is in the fatality rate. But, we've had record-setting low years.

We are now comparing the serious injuries against serious violations. We're seeing a drop in both. That's indicative that we are dealing more effectively as an industry

with the hazards that cause people to get hurt. So that's encouraging. As these numbers drop, it will become more difficult. It is a matter of us being focused and continuing to not be afraid to challenge the status quo.

On the small mine office

“Our small mine office has been a great success. It is still staffed with our people from different programs. These folks (staff of 19) have visited, in the past year, over 1,600 small mines to help them understand how to comply with our rules and regulations. Depending on an operator's willingness to have us there, we



not only help him understand the law, but understand safety policies and programs. We haven't had enough time (to measure the program), but we've seen a decline in the past year in trends in that segment. In many cases, we're there because they don't have the resources that large operations have. We're not going to kid ourselves to think they have the resources to do it, so why not go work with what they have. Part of our goal is to help them in that process. We've been very successful and had a lot of positive feedback. We're hoping to build off that.

On working with OSHA and NIOSH

“We work very closely with NIOSH and OSHA. A lot of the things you see OSHA undertake are (similar) to what MSHA is undertaking. When we have issues that are common to both agencies we make sure that we're in touch with each other to maximize whatever's going to come from our efforts. Our relationship with NIOSH is as good as it has been for many years. We have a number of initiatives where we have a cooperative agreement with NIOSH. We have one working on personal dust monitors and another applicable to the aggregate industry on noise. There's a lot of coordination that goes on between the staff of MSHA and the staff of NIOSH as well as their administrations to make sure we are working in harmony and not working against each other.

On the personal effect of heading MSHA

“It's been very interesting. I wouldn't trade this experience for anything. It's been a lot of fun, at times

frustrating. But overall, I'm probably more honored today than I was three years ago when I came on. I've had a chance to interact with a great community and do some things I think will help this community. Our mission is very noble. The people working in this profession have a noble profession. The mining community responded very well to our initiatives and to my being here. It's been terrific overall. It's been a positive thing from a personal perspective.

I was a little naïve (about dealing with the media and the overall level of scrutiny). I expected it, but not to the level that I've seen. (The scrutiny) is largely because we've undertaken a lot of changes and sometimes change creates different perceptions. That's been a surprise to me.

I also probably didn't appreciate the employees of the agency as much three years ago as I do today. I've worked with this agency for my entire mining career, but I never really recognized the quality of people that are in the agency itself. We have very dedicated people who work very hard to make lives better for miners and the mining community.

I hope I'm a different person. I hope I've grown from it. If I haven't, I've missed a great opportunity. It's given me a different perspective on a number of areas but the personal growth has been tremendous for me.

On life in Washington D.C.

“My home and family are still in Denver. The most challenging aspect of having this position is that my time with my family is limited. Over the course of a year, I'm probably home once every five weeks. Fortunately, my children are raised. It's something I'm not used to, but we've learned how to deal with it. The nice thing is that my family believes in what I do and encouraged me to do this. If it hadn't been for that, it would have been much more difficult. D.C. is certainly different from the west. There are a lot of things I've been able to do as a result of this job that, perhaps, I would have never done before. It's been a rewarding experience. But, am I going to stay in the east? My answer is no. It's not that I don't like the east, but my home is in the west. And it's the style of life in the west that I like.

On the future of the job

“I think you have to take jobs like this one day at a time. I've made a commitment, and I want to fulfill that commitment. But for me personally to look beyond the first term would be a mistake. The reason it would be a mistake is that I don't want to lose sight of what I came here to help accomplish with this administration. If I look too far down the road, I may lose my ability to get those things done. We'll see what happens when the time comes. 🐾