

Feds find Sago Mine air packs deficient

AP Associated Press

By TIM HUBER, Associated Press Writer

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The brand of air pack used by miners during the Sago Mine disaster is prone to have damaged air hoses and can make it difficult for miners to breathe, according to a federal report obtained by The Associated Press.

The air packs made by Pennsylvania-based CSE Corp. have been under scrutiny since the January explosion, because miners who carried the packs died of carbon monoxide poisoning and the lone survivor has said some of his crew's packs failed.

The report by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health suggests problems with the air packs are getting worse, not better. It is the most recent data about air packs' performance since a series of tests conducted between 1998 and 2000.

The report covers two rounds of testing between 2000 and 2004. The earlier tests involved 90 CSE air packs removed from mines. Those tests found 10 percent of the air packs with breathing hoses stuck together and 9 percent with torn hoses.

NIOSH said the company addressed the problems by adding a test that can detect damage and indicators that show whether air packs have been exposed to extremely high temperatures, which can damage them. Despite the fixes, the government found more problems in later tests — 19 percent of 98 air packs had stuck hoses, while 9 percent had torn hoses.

The tests also found the packs produce high breathing pressure, and when combined with high levels of carbon dioxide, they can make it more difficult to breathe.

The chief mining regulatory body, the Mine Safety and Health Administration, was still examining the report, a spokesman said.

"MSHA experts are reviewing the NIOSH studies and it is premature to comment at this time on NIOSH's results," said MSHA spokesman Dirk Fillpot.

The test results are significant because CSE has approximately 60 percent of the U.S. market for air packs. The company's air packs are popular because their small size and light weight make them easy to carry on a miner's belt.

Randal McCloy Jr., the lone survivor of the Sago disaster, said four members of his crew couldn't get their CSE air packs to work in the January disaster. Eleven of the 12 miners who died in the Jan. 2 accident succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning. CSE has since been sued by McCloy and the families of two other victims.

The company has maintained that its air packs work properly, so long as miners inspect them and care for them according to its criteria. Messages seeking comment were left with an attorney for CSE on Thursday.

NIOSH also tested air packs made by three other manufacturers: Pleasant Prairie, Wis.-based Ocenco, Pittsburgh-based Draeger Safety and Pittsburgh-based Mine Safety Appliances Co. The agency found some problems, but they were not as numerous as with CSE's units.

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