



Testimony of

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Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education
and Related Agencies

of the

United States Senate

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Good morning. My name is Bruce Watzman. I'm the Vice President for Safety and Health for the National Mining Association.

On behalf of NMA and its member companies in coal and minerals production, I extend, once again, our heartfelt sympathies to the families who lost loved ones at the Sago mine.

This tragedy leaves no one involved with the industry untouched. Anyone who has worked in a mine ... or knows someone who does ... feels deep sorrow.

In addition, it compels all of us in the mining community to work harder towards the one goal we all share -- zero fatalities.

We join with others here today to ensure that out of this tragedy will emerge a stronger resolve and greater cooperation in pursuit of safer mines. Our expectation is that from this and similar hearings ... and from the exhaustive official investigation now underway ... we can do better what we've tried hard to do well.

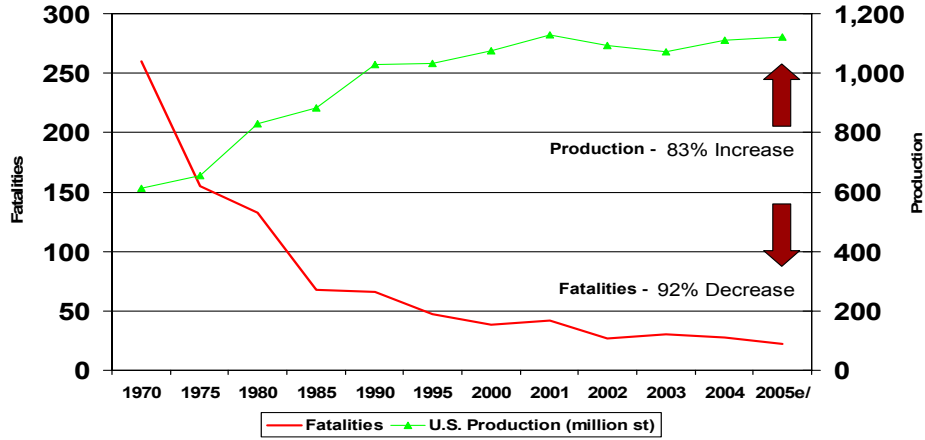
It is in this spirit that I appear before this subcommittee today – to offer information on where we have been and recommendations for what we can do to advance mine safety.

As this committee considers the recommendations as a result of this hearing, I urge that we not create an unproductive atmosphere in which parties feel the need to retreat to their respective corners of the ring and defend themselves. Rather, let us create an atmosphere where we come to the center of the ring stand together and fight against a common enemy – workplace accidents.

INDUSTRY PERFORMANCE

The coal mining industry takes seriously its commitment to protect its workforce. Since the first oil embargo in the early 1970s, the coal industry has been called upon to provide more coal to meet our Nation's energy requirements. We have answered that call while providing a safer working environment for our workforce. Since 1970, coal production has increased by 83 percent and coal mine fatalities have decreased by 92 percent.

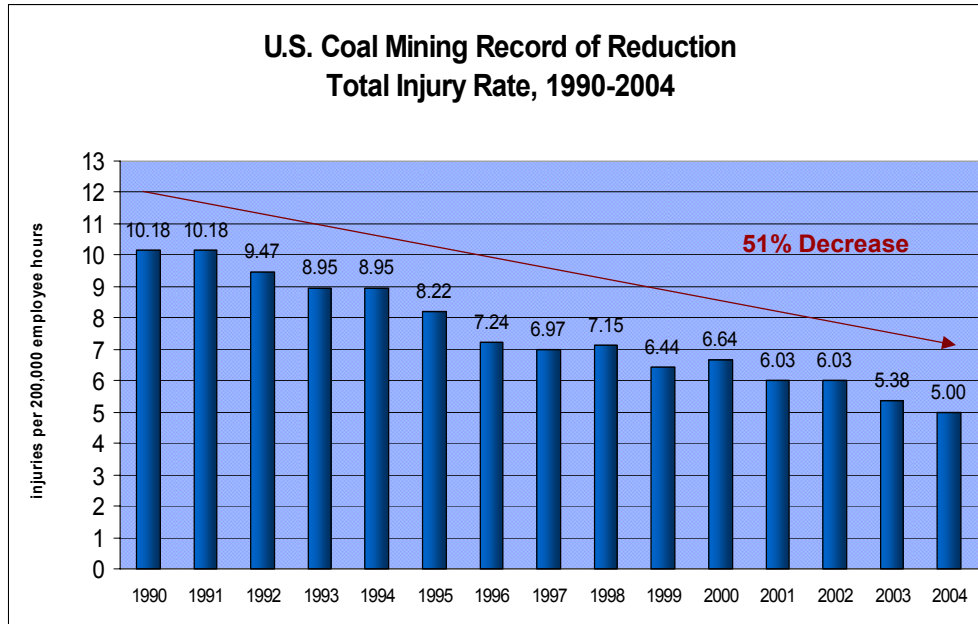
U.S. Coal Mine Safety and Production Trends



Source: Mine Safety & Health Administration (MSHA)

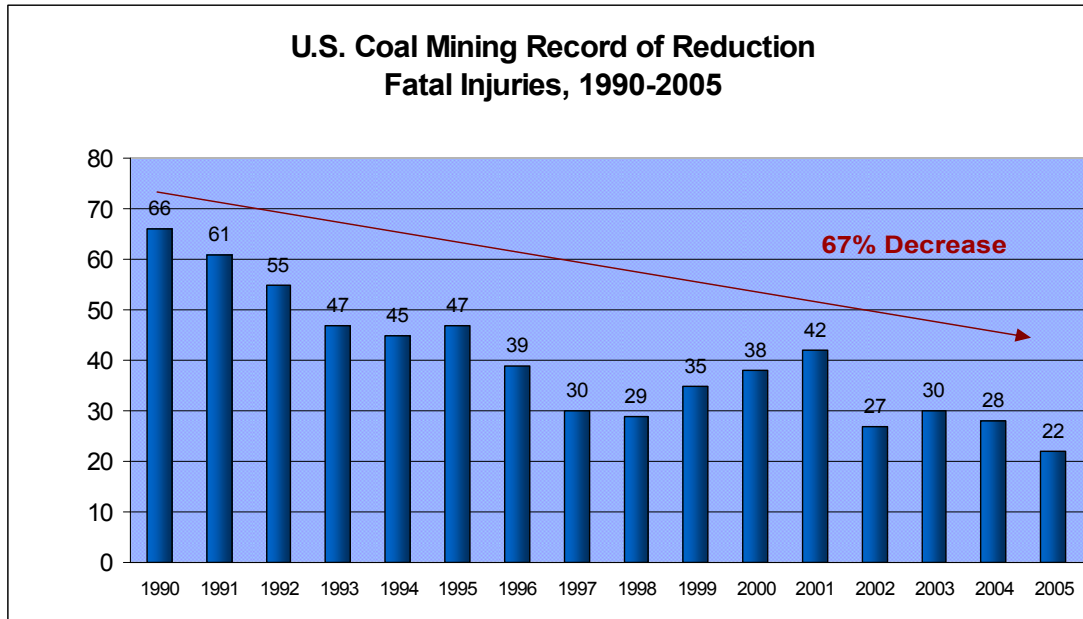


As we look at the first five years of the 21st century we see a continuation of the trend that began in the early 1970's - safer coal mining.



Source: Mine Safety & Health Administration (MSHA)





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This demonstrates that safety and productivity are not competing goals, but rather complimentary goals. Working in what are inherently hostile environments, today's mining companies have proven that a well-trained, experienced workforce, using state-of-the-art equipment, can accomplish the dual goals of working safely and being productive. And yet these accomplishments are diminished by what remains to be done and what NMA and its members are committed to working towards. Following a tragedy such as this, these statistics understandably pale before the names of those lost.

MINE SAFETY AND TECHNOLOGY

The events at the Sago Mine have strengthened our resolve to work harder and work smarter at mine safety. This effort must begin with a close and comprehensive examination of current safety and rescue procedures. Concurrent with a well-trained workforce and state-of-the-art equipment, the coal industry has incorporated safety management into its business and moral ethic. Safety management comprises four functions: prevention, detection, first response and sustained response. These are not new to the coal industry; we've incorporated them for decades as sound safety practice dictates.

Our ability to further advance coal mine safety and health will require an examination of the structural and technologic hurdles that must be overcome. It will require a commitment to identify and foster the development of 21st century technology that will perform effectively and reliably in the mining environment. Technologies such as the introduction of remote control miners, integrated methane monitors on mining equipment, atmospheric monitoring systems, longwall mining systems and canopies on equipment are a few of the advances that have contributed to the industry's improved safety record. Advances in technology have been integral to our safety improvements thus far and will, we believe, contribute to further improve mine safety in the future.

MINE SAFETY COMMISSION FORMED

In pursuit of this goal and to ensure a focused and transparent effort, this week the National Mining Association is announcing the formation of a Mine Safety Technology and Training Commission. The commission will be drawn from safety experts in academia, labor, industry, and public and state agencies for the purpose of examining safety technologies, emergency response and rescues procedures and training regimes that could significantly enhance safety and rescue conditions in our nation's underground coal mines. The commission will be chaired by a recognized expert in mine safety, Dr. R. Larry Grayson, chairman and professor of mining and nuclear engineering at the University of Missouri-Rolla. Dr. Grayson will report the commission's preliminary findings to the public and mine safety authorities by July 1, with a final report by the end of this year. We anticipate the commission will examine, among other items, the current and new promising technologies for mine communication, tracking miners' locations, rescue technology and methods to more readily and reliably detect potential safety hazards.

This subcommittee is very aware of the need to maintain a vibrant mining research program within the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). The tragic events at the Sago Mine underscore this need. The federal government has an important role in technology development – in order to bring safer, new devices to a relatively small market for safety equipment. We urge your support to strengthen this vital government function.

In addition to government participation, our industry will continue to examine how new technology and training can be adapted to further improve mine safety performance. We must continue to use the labor- business- government model that has served us well in the past on coal mine safety.

It is especially important for us to continue to work together as partners because coal is an industry with a changing face. Many of the people who joined this industry in the 1970s, and who have built a career producing America's energy, are now retiring. We – government, industry and workers – all must work together to develop programs to train and educate a new generation of employees so that they can have a safe and productive career in an industry vital to this country's energy markets and national interests.

In conclusion, if we work together, as partners, and if we focus on improvement we will continue to advance both the cause of mine safety and the cause of energy security.

Before closing, Mr. Chairman, I would remiss if I did not recognize the efforts of those who participated in the rescue activities at the Sago Mine. The efforts of these brave and often unheralded rescue team members cannot be minimized. We as an industry are fortunate to have these brave individuals as a part of our mining family. We thank them for their service.

We stand in the ring with you ready to lead in this effort to advance coal mine safety.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman