

Statement of U.S. Representative Tim Murphy (PA-18)

**Before the Subcommittee on Workforce Protections
Committee on Education and the Workforce
U.S. House of Representatives
Hearing on “Mine Safety and Health: A Congressional Perspective”
2175 Rayburn House Office Building
Thursday, March 16, 2006**

Chairman Norwood, Ranking Member Owens, distinguished colleagues of the subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to express my views about how Congress can better protect the health and safety of our nation’s mine workers. Mine safety has been at the forefront of public policy issues in 2006 because the year was ushered in by the heartbreaking disasters at the Aracoma Alma and Sago mines in West Virginia. Two months after the tragedies, our prayers and our thoughts continue to be with the families who experienced the loss of the 16 lives in the accidents.

I sit before you as the great-grandson of a coal miner, who worked in Pennsylvania mines back in the day when carts were pulled by mules and mines were lit by candles. Mining was very dangerous work then. The industry has made remarkable strides ever since. But as we debate legislative action, we must keep the focus on mine safety and do everything we can to ensure the safety of workers.

I represent coal miners, coal mines, coal mine owners, and coal mine suppliers. I have toured three of those mines and saw longwall and continuous mining methods at work. In my district in southwestern Pennsylvania, the mining industry has been an integral part of the way of life for a century and a half. During the Industrial Revolution, Pittsburgh coal made Pittsburgh steel, and Pittsburgh steel built America and the world. Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie made steel in Pittsburgh not because the area had iron ore, but because the region had a colossal supply of coal and the water resources to transport it.

To this day, Pittsburgh sits on a 250-year supply of coal. The Pittsburgh coal seam remains one of the most valuable natural resource stockpiles in the world. Moreover, the promise of expanded clean coal technologies can unlock coal’s potential to lead our nation toward energy independence and greater economic security. In an era which foreign leaders threaten to increase the price of oil when we block their wishes to acquire and threaten to use nuclear weapons, King Coal takes on even greater importance.

However, as this subcommittee and all Members of the House consider proposals to change the laws governing the mining industry, the most important goal of any legislation simply must be to make mining safer. I know all my colleagues share this priority. Every miner and their families expect as they take that long elevator ride down the mines, expect the mines to be as safe as possible.

Though safety must be the priority of any congressional action, it should be pointed out that safety measures over the years have significantly improved mining safety. Mining fatalities have steadily decreased over the last several decades, reaching a record low in 2005. The last single year in which 100 or more miners died was 1984. Only once in the last ten years has more than 40 miners perished in the same year, but every miners life lost is one loss to many.

Indeed, advanced mining technology, including the introduction of longwall mining machines, remote control miners, and the installation of methane monitors on production equipment, has helped substantially reduce both injury and fatality rates in our nation's coal mines over the years. Thus, we know that applied safety measures do work.

The recent tragedies have shined a spotlight on all aspects of mining. There are concerns about whether miners are sufficiently employing technology to communicate, whether procedures are properly followed in the event of an emergency, and the use of “belt air.” Belt air refers to air that is directed into the underground coal mine, and passes through the same tunnels in which conveyor belts transport coal out of the mine. This air can be unhealthy to breathe and even flammable. On each of these issues and others, I hope we can all learn from our constituents and each other through this process.

In addition, I hope we recount the success stories of the mining industry alongside some of the failures. For instance, CONSOL Energy, based in my district, sent their own rescue teams that arrived first at the Sago mine. The CONSOL rescue teams again and again work tirelessly to help miners throughout Pennsylvania and West Virginia, regardless of who owns the mine. We would all do well to learn from their successes. How are they equipped? How are they trained? What can they teach us? What did we learn from the Quecreek mine rescue?

Certainly, legislation should provide additional measures where they are needed. But instead of reinventing the wheel, first and foremost, the Department of Labor must be able to better enforce existing laws. We must make sure that have all the tools they need to enforce these laws. Also, we need to carefully review procedures used by mining companies that have great safety compliance records. How do they manage to make mining safer when others do not? A review of best practices will help us do better, as well as examining those who fail to meet safety standards.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for this hearing and your commitment to protecting our nation’s mine workers. Congress must, and I know Congress will, take appropriate steps to help ensure the tragic circumstances at Sago and Aracoma Alma never develop again. The coal industry has helped fuel this nation for 150 years, and coal can be used to heat our homes, power our economy, and protect our nation for at least another 150 years if we continue to use it. Let us address the operational safety concerns of the critical American coal industry carefully—not just quickly—for the lives of too many miners are at stake.

Thank you very much.