U.S. Department of Labor
Office of Inspector General
Office of Audit

BRIEFLY…

Highlights of Report Number 05-14-002-06-001, issued to the Assistant Secretary for Mine Safety and Health.

WHY READ THE REPORT

Mine air can contain toxic substances or flammable concentrations of gases. In addition, coal mining practices can deposit an explosive layer of coal dust on mine surfaces. To help detect these conditions, MSHA operates laboratories (labs) that test samples of air, gases, dusts, and solids sent by mine inspectors and operators around the country in order to improve mine safety and health. Mine inspectors use lab results to validate citations and orders issued at the time of sample collection. Mine operators use lab results to identify hazardous conditions. For both, receipt of timely results is critical to miner safety.

This report highlights actions MSHA should take to establish and implement performance standards that cover the full sampling life cycle from collection to lab processing.

WHY OIG CONDUCTED THE AUDIT

Since the receipt of timely lab results may be critical for miner safety, we designed our audit to answer the following questions:

- Has MSHA established and implemented timeliness performance standards for sample collection, analysis, and results reporting?
- Is MSHA meeting the established performance standards?

READ THE FULL REPORT

To view the report, including the scope, methodology, and full agency response, go to: http://www.oig.dol.gov/public/reports/oa/2014/05-14-002-06-001.pdf.

September 19, 2014

MSHA LABORATORIES HAVE IMPROVED TIMELINESS, BUT THE OVERALL SAMPLING PROCESS COULD BE ENHANCED

WHAT OIG FOUND

MSHA has established timeliness standards for the collection and mailing time for only some sample types. While the remaining types of samples are not as time-sensitive or subject to sample degradation, establishing and implementing performance standards is still important in protecting miners.

MSHA has established performance standards for the analysis and reporting phase of the process for all sample types. Specifically, the labs have implemented standard operating procedures that dictate the turnaround times for timely analysis and reporting of samples and results. While MSHA met most of its turnaround time goals, the labs did not always receive samples or report the analyses results timely.

Without a unified performance standard, which covers the entire cycle time from collection to results, MSHA does not know how quickly it is mailing, analyzing, and reporting sample results that are critical to ensuring the safety and health of miners.

WHAT OIG RECOMMENDED

The OIG recommended the Assistant Secretary for Mine Safety and Health: (1) re-evaluate the appropriateness of the TATs for mine air/gas and MNM total dust samples; (2) establish and implement collection and mailing time standards for MNM total dust, MNM respirable dust, coal quartz, and coal respirable dust samples not overnighted by an inspector or submitted by a mine operator; (3) establish agency performance standards and supporting policies based on full life cycle sampling, and implement a system for tracking life cycle samples exceeding the goals for all sample types; (4) consider pursuing accreditation for the mobile labs; and (5) take steps needed to ensure IPAL uploads occur timely.

In response, MSHA generally agreed with our findings and either plans to, or has already initiated, various corrective actions.