



BRIEFLY...

DESPITE PAST SUCCESS, MSHA’S MINE EMERGENCY RESPONSE PREPAREDNESS HAMPERED BY PERSISTENT ISSUES

Why We Did the Audit

When a mine experiences an emergency, a well-executed response can save lives. Federal law requires mine operators to notify the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) within 15 minutes of finding out about an accident. MSHA then decides which, if any, resources to deploy. Insufficient planning, personnel, equipment, or training on the part of MSHA could hamper its mine emergency response and jeopardize the rescue of miners in need.

In response to the deaths of miners during three mine accidents in 2006, Congress required that operators develop mine emergency response plans. However, a prior OIG audit found MSHA had not provided adequate oversight of the development of these plans. Given this concern, as well as the inherent risk associated with mine rescue activities, we performed an audit to determine:

To what extent did MSHA respond to mine emergencies and prepare for future emergencies?

To answer this question, we interviewed MSHA personnel and stakeholders and analyzed MSHA data for fiscal years 2018 through 2023.

Read the Full Report

For more information, go to: <https://www.oig.dol.gov/public/reports/oa/2026/05-26-001-06-001.pdf>.

What We Found

While stakeholders generally reported positive feedback on MSHA’s response to past mine emergencies, we found MSHA needs to improve its preparedness, including correcting issues identified from prior emergencies. First, we found MSHA may have wasted up to \$9.5 million on a contract to move mine emergency personnel, equipment, and vehicles—moves that never fully happened due to poor planning. Second, MSHA’s data for mine emergency operations was unreliable, affecting MSHA’s ability to report accurate spending data and potentially resulting in four Antideficiency Act violations (see Table).

Table: Potential Antideficiency Act Violations

Fiscal Year	MSHA Revised Totals Provided to the OIG	OIG-Identified Estimated Costs	Potential Violation?
2019	\$1,317,600	\$2,500,000	Yes
2020	\$1,017,600	\$3,000,000	Yes
2021	\$1,704,523	\$2,800,000	Yes
2023	\$1,152,600	\$2,100,000	Yes

Source: MSHA-provided costs and MSHA contracts

Third, we found MSHA can improve communication with the mining industry, including for issues with equipment interoperability. Fourth, MSHA could not provide accident investigation documentation required by its guidance. Finally, fifth, MSHA remains vulnerable to issues identified from previous mine disasters, specifically: (1) keeping guidance up to date; (2) appropriately issuing withdrawal orders; (3) ensuring equipment availability at mine rescue stations during emergencies; (4) sufficiently training all staff involved with emergencies; and (5) conducting after-action reviews.

These issues occurred because MSHA did not effectively design or execute aspects of its internal control system, such as providing supervisory oversight and developing or following guidance. As a result, MSHA’s mine emergency response preparedness—including oversight of the program and planning for future emergencies—was hampered. Insufficient emergency preparedness could lead to unnecessary delays or confusion in MSHA’s response. Further, we are concerned that MSHA may be insufficiently prepared to handle multiple simultaneous mine emergencies, or a larger mine emergency, such as a mine disaster.

What We Recommended

We made 1 recommendation to the Secretary of Labor to investigate the potential Antideficiency Act violations and 11 to MSHA to improve its mine emergency response program. The latter included developing cost tracking, guidance, training, and new system controls, among others. MSHA agreed with all but two of our recommendations.