
NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
2006EMPR0042-001307
Oct. 30, 2006

Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources

SULLIVAN MINE REPORT CONFIRMS UNPRECEDENTED INCIDENT

CRANBROOK – The tragic circumstances that led to four fatalities at a water sampling shed at the decommissioned Sullivan mine on May 15 - 17, 2006 was an unprecedented incident caused by an oxygen-deficient atmosphere, the Province’s chief inspector of mines Fred Hermann has concluded.

“The incident was caused by an oxygen-deficient atmosphere. However, previous to this incident, there was no indication of a problem at the sampling shed or anywhere on the mine site,” said Hermann. “We have clearly established the cause of death of the four victims, but this accident is unprecedented in the history of mining and the process that led to the oxygen-depleted atmosphere has not, to our knowledge, occurred anywhere else in the world.”

The incident claimed the lives of Doug Erickson, a Pryzm Environmental consultant working for Teck Cominco, Bob Newcombe, an employee of Teck Cominco, and BC Ambulance Service Paramedics Kim Weitzel and Shawn Currier.

The chief inspector of mines presented his conclusions as well as recommendations to further ensure the safety of workers and rescue personnel at all mines in British Columbia.

“I accept the chief inspector of mines’ report and its findings and support his recommendations to ensure the safety of workers and first responders at mine sites,” said Minister of State for Mining Bill Bennett, who expressed condolences to the families and friends of the victims. “At this time our thoughts and prayers are with them as well as the residents of the Kimberley and Cranbrook area who have been touched by this loss.”

The chief inspector of mines’ report includes the following conclusions:

- The accident was caused by the accumulation of oxygen-depleted air within the shed. This atmosphere was unexpectedly mobilized from within the dump, entering the shed through the drainage pipe installed to direct water from the collection ditch to a treatment facility.
- The lack of any prior indication of a hazard at this sampling shed contributed to Doug Erickson and Bob Newcombe entering the shed without concern for a potentially hazardous environment.
- Kim Weitzel entered the shed with the understanding that she was responding to a drowning. On her way down the ladder she uttered an exclamation and questioned the presence of gas. By the time she asked that question it was too late for her to extricate herself.
- Lack of basic hazard recognition training and experience contributed to the loss of Shawn Currier. Currier entered the shed to render assistance to his partner immediately after Kim Weitzel was overcome.

“We are doing additional research and tests to determine what caused the oxygen-depleted air to be in the shed,” Hermann said.

The chief inspector of mines has determined that the accident was caused by the accumulation of oxygen-deprived atmosphere in the sampling shed. This air mixture was transported through a drainage pipe feeding into the shed from the covered ditch surrounding the toe of the dump. The ditch was designed to direct water flowing through the dump into a collection system for treatment.

Research and modelling as to why the shed had an oxygen-depleted atmosphere will be conducted, including simulating the conditions (including temperature and atmospheric conditions) present during the incident in the sampling shed in May 2006. Results will be released in fall 2007.

Following the incident, the chief inspector of mines ordered interim measures in May to ensure that a similar event could not happen at any other mine site in the province. Directives issued by the chief inspector of mines following the accident will remain in place, and the chief inspector is recommending additional amendments.

The chief inspector of mines, a statutory officer, carried out this investigation under the authority of the Mines Act and Mines Regulation. Now complete, this report will be provided to the provincial coroner and concludes the investigation into the events of May 15 – 17, 2006 by the Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources.

The chief inspector of mines’ report is available on the Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources website at www.gov.bc.ca/empr.

1 backgrounder(s) attached.

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