

REMOTELY OPERATED MACHINERY – ROCKFALL - FATAL ACCIDENT

INCIDENT

The operator of a remote control loader was fatally injured by a rockfall while operating the machine manually in an open stope. The rockfall which was estimated to be 1,000 tonnes completely buried the loader. Upon retrieval of the loader by remote control methods, it was found that the canopy had become separated from the machine allowing rocks to enter the cabin area crushing the operator.

FINDINGS

A number of pillars designed to support the stope hanging wall were lost during the period prior to the accident. This made the hanging wall unstable and eventually led to its partial collapse.

Testing of the remote control transmitter revealed that it was operating satisfactorily and correctly. The remote control equipment fitted to the loader could not be tested as it was damaged by the rockfall.

The safe working procedure for loading by the use of remote control equipment stipulated that operators were not to go beyond the stope brow. The operator was not complying with the procedure at the time of the accident.

COMMENT AND PREVENTATIVE ACTION

This accident highlights the importance of following procedures. It is of great concern that the procedure which identified the risk associated with entry into the open stope area was not followed by the operator. Compliance with the procedure in this case would have prevented the loss of life which took place.

It is incumbent upon each employer to train and supervise operators so as to ensure that safe working procedures are complied with at all times. All levels of management should implement audit programmes and task observation protocols to verify that the necessary procedures are being followed and, where necessary, intervention strategies are invoked to re-educate employees who do not comply with safe work procedures. It is also of prime importance that managers and supervisors regularly and clearly articulate their desire to see safe working procedures used in the workplace and that employees are consulted in the development of such procedures in order to ensure that they are practicable and effective and that employees can, in fact, follow them on the job.

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23 February 1998