

MINUTES
BOARD OF COAL MINE SAFETY
DEP New Stanton Office
March 4, 2026 – 10 AM – New Stanton, PA

VOTING BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT

Nathan Houtz, DEP, Deputy Secretary for Active and Abandoned Mining Operations
Robert Bodenschatz, Pennsylvania Coal Alliance
Roger Berringer, United Mine Workers of America
Ronald Kingan, United Mine Workers of America
Todd Moore, Pennsylvania Coal Alliance
Joseph Zelanko, Pennsylvania Coal Alliance

VOTING BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Ronald Bowersox, United Mine Workers of America

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION STAFF PRESENT

Laura Campbell, DEP, Policy Office
Heather Cordial, DEP, Bureau of Mine Safety
David Lowery, DEP, Bureau of Mine Safety
Matthew Owens, DEP, Bureau of Mine Safety
Jack Palumbo, DEP, Policy Office
Brad Russian, DEP, Bureau of Mine Safety
Peggy Scheloske, DEP, Bureau of Mine Safety
Chas Washlack, DEP, Bureau of Mine Safety

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION STAFF PRESENT VIA TEAMS

Richard Marcil, DEP, Bureau of Regulatory Counsel
Jennifer McLuckie, DEP
Robert “Bo” Reiley, DEP, Bureau of Regulatory Counsel
Richard Wagner, DEP, Director, Bureau of Mine Safety

CALL TO ORDER AND INTRODUCTIONS

Nathan Houtz, DEP Deputy Secretary for Active and Abandoned Mining Operations and Acting Chairperson of the Board of Coal Mine Safety (Board), called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m. in the DEP New Stanton Office, Washington and Green Conference Rooms. Acting Chairperson Houtz asked the members present to state their names and indicate who they are representing on the Board. He then asked all others present in person and via Microsoft Teams to introduce themselves. Acting Chairperson Houtz welcomed Ronald Kingan as the newest Board member representing the United Mine Workers of America.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The Board considered its first item of business, which was approval of the September 3, 2025, meeting minutes.

Ronald Berringer moved to adopt the meeting minutes. Ronald Bowersox seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved by the Board, and the minutes were adopted as presented.

UPDATE AND DISCUSSION

Drug Testing Reciprocity

Richard Wagner, Director, Bureau of Mine Safety, reported on a discussion with West Virginia concerning reciprocity for decertification actions when an individual loses certification in another state due to a failed drug test. Board members discussed concerns that a miner decertified in West Virginia could still obtain employment in Pennsylvania and noted that some mines operate across the Pennsylvania-West Virginia border. Director Wagner stated that West Virginia posts certification information on a website. The Department will continue reviewing reciprocity and provide a follow-up at the next Board meeting.

Subcommittee for Review of New Technology (Section 350 Task Force)

Chas Washlack, Mine Safety Electrical Program Manager, Bureau of Mine Safety, reported that the Section 350 Task Force met twice to discuss new technology for automation of powered haulage systems, including mobile bridge conveyors and longwalls. He summarized the task force's preliminary findings, including challenges associated with Pennsylvania reserves and seam heights, the need to address statutory requirements involving gas detection, gas checks, and operator responsibility, and the need to maintain the same level of safety through any automation process. The Task Force believes there may be ways to pursue automation through existing provisions for new technology and MSHA petitions. Board members discussed the scope of the Task Force's work, proximity detection, longwall automation, and whether proposed approaches should focus narrowly on technology or more broadly on all means of preventing accidents. He also reported that a Task Force member recently passed away, and a new member has been recommended.

Underground Mining Automation

Todd Moore discussed underground mining automation and stated that the objective is to advance technologies that remove operators from areas of high exposure while maintaining miner safety. Discussion followed regarding the current capabilities and limitations of automation, including the extent to which longwall shearers can be operated from outside the face, the difficulty of achieving fully automated operation in Pittsburgh seam conditions, and the safety benefit of reducing operator dust exposure. Board members expressed support for continuing to move new technologies forward in a practical manner without reducing safety.

Joseph Zelanko made a statement on behalf of the Board members representing coal mine operators. He covered concerns relating to the Department's process for evaluating new technology, outdated guidance documents, distinctions between face haulage equipment and longwall automation, limitations of current proximity detection systems, and the need for a clear process and formal response when new technology is proposed.

Subcommittees

Acting Chairperson Houtz followed up on the Board's action at the September 3, 2025, meeting to form a subcommittee for review of new technology. The Department's Bureau of Regulatory Counsel determined that Section 106 of the Bituminous Coal Mine Safety Act does not provide a mechanism for the Board to establish a formal subcommittee. Board members discussed whether technical issues could be raised directly with the Bureau of Mine Safety and reported on at a subsequent the Board meetings, including concerns relating to transparency, quorum issues, meeting notification requirements, and the Sunshine Law.

Board members asked if bylaws could provide the means to establish subcommittees. Jack Palumbo stated that in 2009 the Board voted to not to develop bylaws and the matter could be opened at a later date. Richard Marcil, Bureau of Regulatory Counsel, explained that the Board could hold more frequent meetings rather than creating subcommittees. The Bureau of Regulatory Council will review if bylaws could provide for the establishment of subcommittees.

Expedited Experience Miner Status for New Miners

Brad Russian, Bituminous Mine Safety Division, Bureau of Mine Safety, reported on prior efforts to develop an accelerated experience miner certification pathway modeled on programs in neighboring states. Discussion addressed whether a 6-month pathway could be developed as an alternative to the current 1-year requirement, whether additional safeguards, including broader rotational exposure and training components, would be needed, and the regulatory requirement that only operators can submit plans.

Todd Moore opined on the benefits of an alternate training certification plan that would expose individuals to more mining processes. He said that the requirements for certified miner status are established by statute, and that implementation of an accelerated experience miner program would require a statutory change. Ron Bowersox agreed that an expedited program for apprentice miners should include exposure to different areas of the mine. Rachel Gleason of the Pennsylvania Coal Alliance stated that she would pursue a statutory language.

SAFETY INCIDENTS

Brad Russian reported on an accident at the Harvey Mine on November 3, 2025. Six people were injured during work on a new longwall setup when they encountered an issue with a water line requiring replacement. During the change, a staple coupling was removed from a pressurized water hose that separated forcefully. Six workers in the surrounding area were injured. They were transported to a hospital and evaluated for treatment with non-life-threatening injuries.

At the Cumberland Mine on October 8, 2025, a dozer operator inadvertently entered an underground feeder opening on a raw coal stockpile and was trapped inside. It took approximately 4 hours to rescue the operator.

A final report has not been issued on the fatality at the Torrance Quarry II on September 2, 2025.

OTHER BUSINESS

Brad Russian discussed track distance variance plans. The statute does not provide for a blanket variance to encompass all tracks, therefore site-specific plans are required. He suggested that the Board consider these plans for ideas and a resolution.

Acting Chairperson Houtz directed the need for agenda topics prior to each meeting. At the Board's request, future meeting materials will include reports and summaries for agenda items.

Todd Moore mentioned that that Board typically does not meet in December, and suggested that the meeting could be rescheduled to November. Laura Cambell replied that meetings may be added and rescheduled as needed.

Director Wagner announced that there are scheduling conflicts with the June 3, 2026, and September 2, 2026, meetings. He stated that the Department will reschedule these meetings after consultation with Board members.

PUBLIC COMMENT

John Vanatta offered input regarding full automation on the longwall and the performance of certain functions from outside the face in conjunction with personnel at the equipment.

ADJOURNMENT

The date of the next Board meeting will be announced to members by email and posted on the Board's website. With no further business to discuss, Acting Chairperson Houtz asked for a motion to adjourn.

Ronald Bowersox made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Ronald Kingan seconded this motion, which was unanimously approved by the Board.

The meeting adjourned at 11:33 a.m.