



U.S. Congressman
Nick Rahall
WORKING FOR WEST VIRGINIANS

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**MINE PRODUCTIVITY RESEARCH MUST BE COUPLED
WITH WORKER HEALTH AND SAFETY CONCERNS, RAHALL SAYS**
*Studies Telling Mine Operators To Give Workers Vitamin C
Are A Waste of Taxpayer Dollars*

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- During an oversight hearing by the Subcommittee on Mining and Natural Resources, U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall (D-WV) today charged that the federal government was abdicating its responsibility to worker health and safety concerns for the sake of increasing mine productivity.

"I certainly recognize the need for productivity improvements in our Nation's mines, which is the focus of the Advanced Mining Systems program. At the same time, I would maintain that the displacement of workers and the reduction of employment opportunities under the guise of increased productivity alone is not a responsible or appropriate function of the federal government," Subcommittee Chairman Rahall stated.

The purpose of the hearing was to examine the direction and objectives of the Bureau of Mines' Health, Safety and Mining Technology Program as well as whether adequate resources are being dedicated to research aimed at improving the health and safety of the Nation's miners. A full one-third of the program's resources are dedicated to the development of advanced mining systems using remote controls and robotics which have the effect of eliminating the need for miners.

"It seems like a cruel hoax is being played on the Nation's mining workforce. The Bureau of Mines seems to be saying: Hi, I'm from the federal government and I want to make the mines safer for you by removing you from the mines and using robotics to produce coal instead," Rahall said during the hearing.

While the Bureau has conducted some valuable research, Rahall noted that he is becoming increasingly concerned over the priority being placed by the Administration on projects with questionable health and safety benefits.

"While mine explosions at underground coal mines grab headlines, a variety of more subtle hazards claim the most miners' lives. These hazards include power haulage and material transport mishaps, roof and wall falls and perhaps the most insidious of them all, the penetration of coal dust over a period of years into the lungs of the miner that gives rise to black lung disease," Rahall explained as justification for maintaining a strong government commitment to health and safety technology research. Testifying on behalf of the National Coal Association, Ron Wooten of Consolidation Coal Company agreed that much more work needs to be done on research aimed at preventing roof falls, as well as in other health and safety areas.

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Last year, the Nation's mining death toll was 115: 48 fatalities in metal/non-metal mines and 67 in coal mines. This represented a 13% increase in mine fatalities from the previous year level of 102 deaths. So far in 1989, 19 miners have died in coal mines and 7 in non-coal mines. Five of the coal miner fatalities occurred in West Virginia.

Rahall also took issue with what he felt was research that wasted taxpayer money on projects that have obvious or simplistic results. In support of this contention, he cited recent Bureau of Mines' reports recommending that mouthpieces of Self-Contained-Self-Rescuer training units be washed between classes to avoid the spread of AIDS and giving miners vitamin C and rides to work to reduce absenteeism.

"What would be the response of the men and women who work in the mines if they knew that their taxpayer dollars are being spent on studies that conclude they should take vitamin C so they will never be absent from work, and that they could get AIDS from the SCSR training unit mouthpieces unless they are regularly washed?" Rahall asked the Administrator of the United Mine Workers' Department of Safety and Health, Joe Main, during the hearing. "They would not be happy," Main said.

Rahall said that it is his intention to consider measures to refocus or modify the laws which provide authority for the Bureau of Mines' mission.