

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGES
601 New Jersey Avenue, N.W., Suite 9500
Washington, DC 20001

June 30, 2009

SECRETARY OF LABOR,	:	CIVIL PENALTY PROCEEDING
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH	:	
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA),	:	Docket No. WEST 2009-189
Petitioner	:	A.C. No. 05-03672-167617
	:	
	:	
	:	
v.	:	
	:	
MOUNTAIN COAL COMPANY, L.L.C.,	:	Mine: West Elk Mine
Respondent.	:	

ORDER DENYING RESPONDENT’S MOTION TO DISMISS

This civil penalty proceeding concerns an alleged violation of the permissible miner noise exposure limits in Part 42 of the Secretary’s regulations. The cited violation was designated as significant and substantial in nature to reflect that it was reasonably likely that the violation will result in an accident causing reasonably serious injury. See, e.g., *Cement Division, National Gypsum*, 3 FMSHRC 822, 825 (April 1981). The Secretary has proposed a total civil penalty of \$963.00 in these matters.

Mountain Coal Company, L.L.C. (Mountain Coal) has filed a Motion to Dismiss this case based on its assertion, in essence, that the Secretary failed to file the underlying Petition for Assessment of Civil Penalty within a reasonable time period as contemplated by section 105(a) of the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977, as amended (Mine Act). 30 U.S.C. § 815(a). The Secretary opposes Mountain Coal’s motion.

Section 105(a) provides:

If, after an inspection or investigation, the Secretary issues a citation or order under section 104, [she] shall, *within a reasonable time* after the termination of such inspection or investigation, notify the operator . . . of the civil penalty proposed

(Emphasis added). Thus, this statutory provision requires the Secretary to file a Petition for Assessment of Civil Penalty within a reasonable period of time after a notice of contest is filed.

Commission Rule 28, 29 C.F.R. § 2700.28, provides that the Secretary shall file her petition for assessment of civil penalty within 45 days of receipt of a mine operator’s contest of a proposed assessment. The Secretary filed the subject petition on November 11, 2008, more than

two years after the end of the 45 day filing period provided in Rule 28. Consequently, Mountain Coal contends the citation in issue must be dismissed because the Secretary failed to act reasonably when she filed her petitions for civil penalty considerably later than the 45 days specified in Rule 28.

It is well settled that the Secretary's late filing of a civil penalty petition is not jurisdictional. In this regard, the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit has noted that statutory processing guidelines generally are intended to "spur the Secretary to action" rather than to confer rights on litigants that limit the scope of the Secretary's authority. *Secretary of Labor v. Twentymile Coal Co.*, 411 F.3d 256, 261 (D.C. Cir. 2005). The 45 day filing guideline in Rule 28 was deemed reasonable at a time when the Commission's caseload averaged approximately 2,200 contest and civil penalty cases. In contrast, there are currently 12,880 contest and civil penalty cases, the vast majority of which involve petitions that have been filed by the Secretary. Consequently, strict adherence to a 45 day filing guideline in the face of this unprecedented workload presently is not warranted.

Significantly, it has neither been contended, nor shown, that the two year delay by the Secretary has, in any way, prejudiced Mountain Coal. On balance, in the absence of a showing of prejudice, the Secretary's delay does not provide an adequate basis for imposing the harsh sanction of dismissal. Accordingly, **IT IS ORDERED** that Mountain Coal's Motion to Dismiss **IS DENIED**.

Robert J. Lesnick
Chief Administrative Law Judge

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