

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

601 NEW JERSEY AVENUE, NW
SUITE 9500
WASHINGTON, DC 20001

April 17, 2009

SECRETARY OF LABOR,	:	
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH	:	
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA)	:	Docket No. CENT 2009-96-M
	:	A.C. No. 41-04257-149058
v.	:	
	:	
LUEDERS LIMESTONE, LP	:	Docket No. CENT 2009-97-M
	:	A.C. No. 41-04257-158646
	:	

BEFORE: Duffy, Chairman; Jordan, Young, and Cohen, Commissioners

ORDER

BY THE COMMISSION:

This matter arises under the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977, 30 U.S.C. § 801 et seq. (2006) (“Mine Act”).¹ On November 20, 2008, the Commission received from Lueders Limestone, LP (“Lueders”) motions by counsel to reopen penalty assessments that had become final orders of the Commission pursuant to section 105(a) of the Mine Act, 30 U.S.C. § 815(a).

Under section 105(a) of the Mine Act, an operator who wishes to contest a proposed penalty must notify the Secretary of Labor no later than 30 days after receiving the proposed penalty assessment. If the operator fails to notify the Secretary, the proposed penalty assessment is deemed a final order of the Commission. 30 U.S.C. § 815(a).

However, we have held that in appropriate circumstances, we possess jurisdiction to reopen uncontested assessments that have become final Commission orders under section 105(a). *Jim Walter Res., Inc.*, 15 FMSHRC 782, 786-89 (May 1993) (“*JWR*”). In evaluating requests to reopen final section 105(a) orders, the Commission has found guidance in Rule 60(b) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure under which, for example, a party could be entitled to relief from a final order of the Commission on the basis of mistake, inadvertence, or excusable neglect.

¹ Pursuant to Commission Procedural Rule 12, 29 C.F.R. § 2700.12, on our own motion, we hereby consolidate Docket Nos. CENT 2009-96-M and CENT 2009-97-M, as both dockets involve similar procedural issues and similar factual backgrounds.

See 29 C.F.R. § 2700.1(b) (“the Commission and its Judges shall be guided so far as practicable by the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure”); *JWR*, 15 FMSHRC at 787. We have also observed that default is a harsh remedy and that, if the defaulting party can make a showing of good cause for a failure to timely respond, the case may be reopened and appropriate proceedings on the merits permitted. *See Coal Prep. Servs., Inc.*, 17 FMSHRC 1529, 1530 (Sept. 1995).

The Secretary states that she does not oppose the reopening of the proposed penalty assessments. The record indicates that, because of health problems, the operator’s general partner was absent from his job during much of the relevant time period, and the individuals who became responsible for timely contesting the proposed penalties failed to do so.

Having reviewed Lueders’ requests and the Secretary’s response, in the interests of justice, we hereby reopen this matter and remand it to the Chief Administrative Law Judge for further proceedings pursuant to the Mine Act and the Commission’s Procedural Rules, 29 C.F.R. Part 2700. Accordingly, consistent with Rule 28, the Secretary shall file a petition for assessment of penalty within 45 days of the date of this order. *See* 29 C.F.R. § 2700.28.

Michael F. Duffy, Chairman

Mary Lu Jordan, Commissioner

Michael G. Young, Commissioner

Robert F. Cohen, Jr., Commissioner

Distribution:

Stephen E. Irving, Esq.
Funderburk and Funderburk, LLP
2777 Allen Pkwy., Suite 1000
Houston, TX 77019

W. Christian Schumann, Esq.
Office of the Solicitor
U.S. Department of Labor
1100 Wilson Blvd., Room 2220
Arlington, VA 22209-2296

Myra James, Chief
Office of Civil Penalty Compliance
MSHA
U.S. Dept. of Labor
1100 Wilson Blvd., 25th Floor
Arlington, VA 22209-3939

Chief Administrative Law Judge Robert J. Lesnick
Federal Mine Safety & Health Review Commission
601 New Jersey Avenue, N.W., Suite 9500
Washington, D.C. 20001-2021