

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

1331 PENNSYLVANIA AVE., N.W., SUITE 520N

WASHINGTON, DC 20004-1710

December 11, 2020

SECRETARY OF LABOR, :
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH :
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA) :
: Docket No. WEVA 2020-0204
v. : A.C. No. 46-09092-503554
: :
MARFORK COAL COMPANY, LLC :

BEFORE: Rajkovich, Chairman; Althen and Traynor, 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. (2012) (“Mine Act”). On December 9, 2019, the Commission received from Marfork Coal Company, LLC (“Marfork Coal”) a motion seeking to reopen a penalty assessment that had become a final order 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).


We have held, however, 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 orders, the Commission has found guidance in Rule 60(b) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, under which the Commission may relieve a party from a final order of the Commission on the basis of mistake, inadvertence, excusable neglect, or other reason justifying relief. *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).

Records of the Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration (“MSHA”) indicate that the proposed assessment was delivered on November 13, 2019, and

became a final order of the Commission on December 16, 2019. Marfork Coal's motion says that it submitted its payment of uncontested penalties, which the Secretary acknowledges receiving on December 5, and marked the other penalties for contest. An executive assistant at Marfork Coal's parent company noted the deadline for submitting the contest; however, she left the office for surgery on December 5, and did not submit the contest in time. The company discovered the failure and timely submitted its motion to reopen

The Secretary does not oppose the request to reopen, but urges the operator to take steps to ensure that future assessments are timely contested by mailing the forms to the address provided.

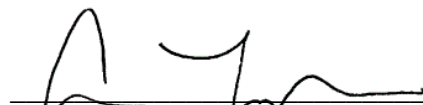
Having reviewed Marfork Coal's request and the Secretary's responses, we find that the operator has sufficiently explained its failure to timely contest the citations at issue as the result of mistake, inadvertence, and excusable neglect. In the interest of justice, we hereby reopen this matter and remand 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.



Marco M. Rajkovich, Jr., Chairman



William I. Althen, Commissioner



Arthur R. Traynor, III, Commissioner

Distribution (by e-mail):

Christopher D. Pence, Esq.
Hardy Pence, PLLC
Attorneys for Marfork Coal Company, LLC
cpence@hardypence.com

Archith Ramkumar
Appellate Counsel
U.S. Department of Labor
Office of the Solicitor
Ramkumar.Archith@dol.gov

Chief Administrative Law Judge Glenn Voisin
Federal Mine Safety & Health Review Commission
GVoisin@fmshrc.gov

Melanie Garris
Office of Civil Penalty Compliance
Mine Safety and Health Administration
Garris.Melanie@DOL.GOV