

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

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WASHINGTON, D.C. 20004-1710

February 10, 2023

SECRETARY OF LABOR,	:	
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH	:	
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA)	:	
	:	
v.	:	Docket No. SE 2022-0044
	:	A.C. No. 38-00085-546287
SPECIALTY VERMICULITE, LLC	:	

BEFORE: Jordan, Chair; Althen, Rajkovich, and Baker, 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 January 14, 2022, the Commission received from Specialty Vermiculite, LLC (“Specialty”) 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), 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).

The Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration (“MSHA”) indicates that the proposed assessment was delivered to the operator on December 9, 2021. The assessment became a final order of the Commission on January 10, 2022.

Specialty states that within a month of receiving the citations in question, the Enoree Operations mine ceased operations on November 18, 2022, and 32 employees were laid off. While thirteen employees remained, only two were office staff, and five employees were subsequently diagnosed with COVID. The operator maintains that the cease in mine operations coupled with the effects of COVID resulted in confusion, uncertainty, and distraction among the remaining employees. Additionally, the employee responsible for contesting MSHA citations is not located at the Enoree mine and did not receive the assessment upon its delivery to the mine. When he did receive the assessment, he mistakenly believed that Specialty had time to contest the citations. When the employee realized his mistake, he immediately contacted counsel to file a motion to reopen. The Secretary does not oppose the request to reopen but urges the operator to take steps to ensure that future penalty contests are timely filed in accordance with MSHA’s regulations at 30 C.F.R. § 100.7 and the Commission’s procedural rules.

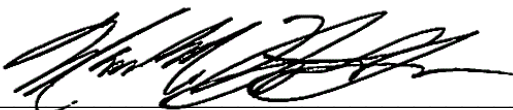
Having reviewed Specialty’s request and the Secretary’s response, we find that due to an administrative error, the operator failed to timely contest the penalty assessment. In the interest of justice, we hereby reopen this matter and remand it to the Chief Administrative Law Judge for further proceedings 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.



Mary Lu Jordan, Chair



William I. Althen, Commissioner



Marco M. Rajkovich, Jr., Commissioner



Timothy J. Baker, Commissioner

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