

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

1331 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE, NW, SUITE 520N

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20004-1710

MAR 27 2015

SECRETARY OF LABOR,
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA)

v.

TATA CHEMICALS (SODA ASH)
PARTNERS

Docket No. WEST 2014-582-M
A.C. No. 48-01497-344166

BEFORE: Nakamura, Acting Chairman; Cohen and Althen, 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 April 25, 2014, the Commission received from Tata Chemicals (Soda Ash) Partners (“Tata”) 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).

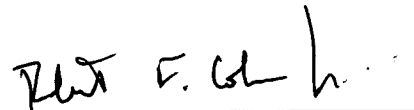
Records of the Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration ("MSHA") indicate that the proposed assessment was delivered on March 3, 2014, and became a final order of the Commission on April 2, 2014. Tata asserts that it failed to timely contest the proposed assessment due to the individual who was responsible for contests being on medical leave, and his assistant being reassigned to different duties as part of a corporate reorganization. The person who then received the proposed assessment, Brett Harding, was inexperienced with the procedures for contesting MSHA penalties and did not realize that the citations and orders had been split into two proposed assessments. Harding mistakenly believed that the citations and orders in proposed assessment No. 000344166 had been timely contested since Tata had properly contested other citations and orders issued during the same inspection. When he discovered the mistake, he acted to rectify it. Tata filed this motion to reopen within less than a month of the proposed assessments becoming final, and accompanied it with an affidavit containing a detailed explanation of the cause of the default.

The Secretary does not oppose the request to reopen, and urges the operator to take steps to ensure that future penalty contests are timely filed.

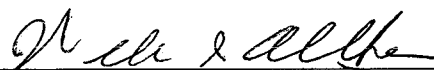
Having reviewed Tata's request and the Secretary's response, in the interest of justice, we hereby reopen this matter and remand it to the Chief Administrative Law Judge for further proceedings pursuant to the Mine Act and the Commission's Procedural Rules, 29 C.F.R. Part 2700. Accordingly, consistent 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.



Patrick K. Nakamura, Acting Chairman



Robert F. Cohen, Jr., Commissioner



William I. Althen, Commissioner

Distribution:

Melanie Garris
Office of Civil Penalty Compliance
MSHA
U.S. Dept. Of Labor
1100 Wilson Blvd., 25th Floor
Arlington, VA 22209-3939

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

Anne D. Harrington, Esq.
Patton & Boggs, LLP
1801 California St., Suite 4900
Denver, CO 80202
aharrington@pattonboggs.com

Chief Administrative Law Judge Robert J. Lesnick
Federal Mine Safety & Health Review Commission
1331 Pennsylvania Avenue, N. W., Suite 520N
Washington, D.C. 20004-1710