

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

1331 PENNSYLVANIA AVE., N.W., SUITE 520N
WASHINGTON, DC 20004-1710

April 17, 2023

SECRETARY OF LABOR, :
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH :
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA) :
v. : Docket No. WEST 2021-0189
BLUE MOUNTAIN ENERGY, INC. : A.C. No. 05-03505-517587

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. (2018) (“Mine Act”). On April 22, 2021, the Commission received from Blue Mountain Energy, Inc. (“Blue Mountain”) 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).

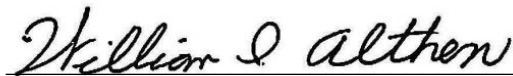
Records of the Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration (“MSHA”) indicate that the proposed assessment was delivered on July 13, 2020. On August 4, 2020, MSHA received a partial payment of the assessment. The remainder of the assessment became a final order of the Commission on August 12, 2020. On September 28, 2020, MSHA sent the operator a delinquency notice.

Blue Mountain asserts that it intended to contest Citation No. 9030973 ever since the citation at issue was upheld during a safety and health conference on June 17, 2020. However, on July 16, 2020, Blue Mountain claims that it inadvertently mailed the contest to the Federal Mine Safety and Health Review Commission and to a Conference Litigation Representative rather than to the correct MSHA address. 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.

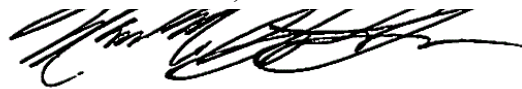
Having reviewed Blue Mountain’s request and the Secretary’s response, we find there is sufficient evidence that mistakes were made, thus satisfying the Rule 60(b) criteria. We find that Blue Mountain acted in good faith, as demonstrated by its explanation for its failure to timely contest the assessment, its earlier efforts to engage in a conference, and the Secretary’s non-opposition. In the interest of justice, we hereby reopen the penalty for Citation No. 9030973 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.



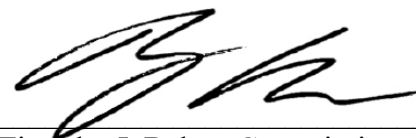
Mary Lu Jordan, Chair



William I. Althen, Commissioner



Marco M. Rajkovich, Jr., Commissioner



Timothy J. Baker, Commissioner

Distribution:

Christopher G. Peterson
Fisher & Phillips LLP
1125 17th Street, Suite 2400
Denver, CO 80202
cpeterson@fisherphillips.com

April Nelson, Esq.
Associate Solicitor
Office of the Solicitor
U.S. Department of Labor
Division of Mine Safety and Health
201 12th Street South, Suite 401
Arlington, VA 22202
Nelson.April@dol.gov

Emily Toler Scott, Esq.
Counsel for Appellate Litigation
Office of the Solicitor
U.S. Department of Labor
Division of Mine Safety and Health
201 12th Street South, Suite 401
Arlington, VA 22202
scott.emily.t@dol.gov

Melanie Garris
USDOL/MSHA, OAASEI/CPCO
201 12th Street South, Suite 401
Arlington, VA 22202
Garris.Melanie@DOL.GOV

Chief Administrative Law Judge Glynn F. Voisin
Federal Mine Safety Health Review Commission
1331 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW Suite 520N
Washington, DC 20004-1710
GVoisin@fmshrc.gov