

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

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WASHINGTON, D.C. 20004-1710

May 28, 2024

SECRETARY OF LABOR, :
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH :
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA) :
 :
v. : Docket No. YORK 2023-0064
 : A.C. No. 37-00243-567271
J.R. VINAGRO CORPORATION :

BEFORE: Jordan, Chair; Althen, Rajkovich, Baker, and Marvit, 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 March 28, 2023, the Commission received from J.R. Vinagro Corporation (“Vinagro”) 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 2, 2022. The assessment became a final order of the Commission on January 6, 2023.

Vinagro states that the underlying citation was one of nine citations issued during a fatality investigation at the mine. When the related assessment arrived, Vinagro's staff opened it and placed it with other papers and notes from the accident investigation. Vinagro's new Safety Director, who is responsible for determining which violations will be contested, was not informed that the assessment had been received. The safety director learned of the delinquent assessment in late February 2023 when he received an email from Vinagro's Payroll Administrator informing him that three assessment forms for three different sites were delinquent. To prevent reoccurrence of this mistake, Vinagro has mandated that all assessments be logged upon receipt, tracked, and immediately emailed to its Safety Director for determinations. Vinagro has not filed any other motions to reopen with the Commission in the last two years. 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 J.R. Vinagro's request and the Secretary's response, we find that due to an administrative error, the penalty assessment was not timely contested. 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


Marcó M. Rajkovich, Jr., Commissioner


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