

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

601 NEW JERSEY AVENUE, NW
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WASHINGTON, DC 20001

April 27, 2010

SECRETARY OF LABOR,	:	
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH	:	
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA)	:	Docket No. LAKE 2009-588
	:	A.C. No. 11-03058-181275
v.	:	
	:	
WHITE COUNTY COAL, LLC	:	

BEFORE: Jordan, Chairman; Duffy, Young, and Cohen, 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. (2006) (“Mine Act”). On July 28, 2009, the Commission received from White County Coal, LLC (“White County”) a motion by counsel 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 section 105(a) orders, the Commission has found guidance in Rule 60(b) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure under which, for example, a party could be entitled to relief from a final order of the Commission on the basis of mistake, inadvertence, or excusable neglect. *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).

On April 7, 2009, the Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration ("MSHA") issued Proposed Assessment No. 000181275 to White County, proposing civil penalties for several citations. White County maintains that it filled out the proposed assessment form indicating that it intended to challenge 14 of the citations and their associated penalties in the sum of \$39,838, and sent the contest to MSHA's Civil Penalty Compliance Office. White County states that it sent its payment in the amount of \$8,053 for the remaining citations to MSHA's Payment Processing Center in St. Louis, Missouri. The operator further states that on approximately July 1, 2009, MSHA sent White County a notice stating that it was delinquent in paying \$39,838 in penalties to MSHA.

The Secretary does not oppose White County's request to reopen the proposed penalty assessment. She notes that a payment dated April 27, 2009, in the amount of \$8,053 was timely received at MSHA's Payment Processing Center. However, the Secretary states that MSHA has no record of receiving the penalty contest form at its Civil Penalty Compliance Office in Arlington, Virginia.

Having reviewed White County's request and the Secretary's response, in the interests 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, Chairman

Michael F. Duffy, Commissioner

Michael G. Young, Commissioner

Robert F. Cohen, Jr., Commissioner

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