

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

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April 5, 2007

SECRETARY OF LABOR, :
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH :
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA) :
 : Docket No. KENT 2007-186
v. : A.C. No. 15-18370-103059
 :
PREMIER ELKHORN COAL COMPANY :

BEFORE: Duffy, Chairman; Jordan and Young, 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. (2000) (“Mine Act”). On March 1, 2007, the Commission received from Premier Elkhorn Coal Company (“Premier Elkhorn”) a motion 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).

On November 9, 2006, the Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration (“MSHA”) issued a proposed penalty assessment, A.C. No. 000103059, to Premier Elkhorn for several citations including Citation Nos. 7436363, 7436366, and 7436368. Premier had previously contested the three citations, which are currently the subject of Docket Nos. KENT 2007-3-R, 2007-5-R, and 2007-6-R. Premier Elkhorn states that it inadvertently sent its contest of the penalty assessment to the MSHA office in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, instead of the MSHA office located in Arlington, Virginia. The Secretary states that she does not oppose Premier Elkhorn’s request to reopen the penalty assessment.

We have held 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 inadvertence or mistake. *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).

Having reviewed Premier Elkhorn’s request, in the interests of justice, we remand this matter to the Chief Administrative Law Judge for a determination of whether good cause exists for Premier Elkhorn’s failure to timely contest the penalty proposals and whether relief from the final order should be granted. If it is determined that such relief is appropriate, this case shall proceed pursuant to the Mine Act and the Commission’s Procedural Rules, 29 C.F.R. Part 2700.

Michael F. Duffy, Chairman

Mary Lu Jordan, Commissioner

Michael G. Young, Commissioner

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