

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

601 NEW JERSEY AVENUE, NW

SUITE 9500

WASHINGTON, DC 20001

June 18, 2008

SECRETARY OF LABOR, :
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH :
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA) :
 : Docket No. WEST 2008-997-M
v. : A.C. No. 04-00743-139453
 :
U.S. BORAX, INC. :

BEFORE: Duffy, Chairman; Jordan, 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. (2000) (“Mine Act”). On May 14, 2008, the Commission received from U.S. Borax, Inc. (“U.S. Borax”) 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).

On February 12, 2008, the Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration (“MSHA”) issued Proposed Assessment No. 000139453 to U.S. Borax, which proposed civil penalties for several citations. U.S. Borax states that its safety manager timely filed a contest of the proposed assessment on approximately February 22, 2008. The operator further submits that, on approximately May 2, it called the Department of Labor’s Office of the Solicitor to determine the location of the Petition for Assessment of Penalty related to the proposed penalties that it was contesting. After being informed that the Solicitor’s office had no record of the matter, U.S. Borax discovered, upon further investigation, that it had inadvertently sent its contest of the

proposed assessment to “100 Wilson Boulevard,” rather than to “1100 Wilson Boulevard.” The Secretary states that she does not oppose U.S. Borax’s request to reopen the proposed 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 U.S. Borax’s request and the Secretary’s response, in the interests of justice, we remand this matter to the Chief Administrative Law Judge for a determination of whether good cause exists for U.S. Borax’s failure to timely contest the penalty proposal 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

Robert F. Cohen, Jr., Commissioner

Distribution:

William D. Humphreys, President
Red River Coal Co., Inc.
P.O. Box 668
Norton ,VA 24273

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

Myra James, Chief
Office of Civil Penalty Compliance
MSHA
U.S. Department of Labor
1100 Wilson Blvd., 25 Floor
Arlington, VA 22209-2296

Chief Administrative Law Judge Robert J. Lesnick
Federal Mine Safety & Health Review Commission
601 New Jersey Avenue, N.W., Suite 9500
Washington, D.C. 20001-2021