

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

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WASHINGTON, DC 20001

December 22, 2008

SECRETARY OF LABOR, :
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH :
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA) :
v. : Docket No. WEVA 2008-1082
: A.C. No. 46-08224-134590 H332
STOWERS TRUCKING, LLC :

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 8, 2008, the Commission received from Stowers Trucking, LLC (“Stowers”) 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 December 20, 2007, the Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration (“MSHA”) issued Proposed Assessment No. 000134590 to Stowers, proposing civil penalties for one citation and four orders. In an affidavit, Stowers’ office manager states that on January 3, 2008, she faxed the proposed assessment to counsel, requesting that the citation and orders and associated proposed penalties be contested. Stowers states that, rather than contesting the proposed assessment, counsel inadvertently placed the proposed assessment form in a file. The mistake was apparently not discovered until a meeting between Stowers and counsel in March 2008, after the proposed assessment had become a final order of the Commission. The Secretary states that she does not oppose Stowers’ 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 Stowers’ 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 Stowers’ 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

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