

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

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May 8, 2008

SECRETARY OF LABOR,	:	
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH	:	
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA)	:	Docket No. WEVA 2008-704
	:	A.C. No. 46-08738-127002
v.	:	
	:	
SPARTAN MINING COMPANY, INC.	:	

BEFORE: Duffy, Chairman; Jordan and Young, Commissioners¹

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 14, 2008, the Commission received from Spartan Mining Company, Inc. (“Spartan”) 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 September 12, 2007, the Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration (“MSHA”) issued a proposed assessment to Spartan as a result of 70 violations at the Diamond Energy Mine. According to Spartan, it faxed the proposed assessment to its attorneys. However, Spartan maintains that a clerical employee at the law firm mistakenly failed

¹ Commissioner Robert F. Cohen, Jr., assumed office after this case had been filed. A new Commissioner possesses legal authority to participate in pending cases, but such participation is discretionary. *Mid-Continent Res., Inc.*, 16 FMSHRC 1218 n.2 (June 1994). In the interest of efficient decision making, Commissioner Cohen has elected not to participate in this matter.

to transmit the assessment to the attorney responsible for filing the contest. Spartan states that the contest therefore was not timely filed and that it did not learn about the problem until it received a notice of unpaid penalties. The Secretary responds by noting that she notified Spartan by letter dated December 13, 2007, that the civil penalties were delinquent but that Spartan did not file a motion to reopen until March 14, 2008, some three months later. The Secretary states that once an operator discovers that it has failed to file a notice of contest through mistake or inadvertence, it should file a notice to reopen *promptly*. The Secretary concludes by stating that she does not oppose Spartan's motion to reopen the 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 Spartan'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 Spartan's failure to timely contest the penalty proposals and whether relief from the final orders 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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