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## Accidents at Two Coal Mines in Coahuila State Renew Safety Concerns

by Carlos Navarro

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Concerns about safety in Coahuila's coal-mining region resurfaced following two separate explosions at two facilities in the span of 10 days. Only one of the accidents resulted in fatalities, but the incident brought reminders of the disaster at the Pasta de Conchos mine in February 2006 ([SourceMex, March 1, 2006](#)) and saw renewed demands that mining companies place a higher priority on implementing safety measures.

The first accident occurred on July 25, when seven miners died in an underground explosion at a facility owned by El Progreso mining company in the community of Múzquiz in the northern coal-producing region of the state. All indications are the explosion was caused by an accumulation of methane gas. Four of the seven victims survived an earlier accident in July 2010 at a mine operated by another company. In that incident, flooding at the mine trapped workers for seven days, leaving them without electricity, water, and food.

There were no casualties in the second accident, which trapped five miners at a facility owned by Grupo Acerero del Norte (GAN) near Nueva Rosita, also in the northern region of the state. The explosion at GAN's Nueva Mimosa mine on Aug. 3 caused about 100 tons of coal to fall in an area where the miners were working. The explosion was also the result of methane gas.

Human rights advocates have decried the unsafe working conditions at mines in the coal-producing region of Coahuila, which have resulted in numerous accidents and the deaths or injuries of many mine workers. The worst accident was at Pasta de Conchos, which claimed 63 lives. But others have occurred in recent years, such as the explosion of Pocito 3 near the city of Sabinas in May 2011, which trapped 14 workers and severely injured one miner. In May of this year, water flooded a mine in the San Felipe el Hondo ejido, also near Sabinas, resulting in two deaths. Familia Pasta de Conchos, a group founded by relatives of mining victims, estimates that 30 people died in accidents in Coahuila's coal mines in 2011.

Unsafe conditions are also present at coal-mining facilities in the states of Chihuahua, Guanajuato, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, and Zacatecas.

### *Small-scale operations unregulated*

A major concern are the mines known as pocitos, which are small-scale operations consisting of narrow tunnels, where workers are forced to extract coal under inhuman conditions. Miners are often forced to crouch or kneel for eight hours. Ironically, creating the pocitos was part of a scheme by the Coahuila state government to develop the coal-mining industry. By some estimates, at least 50,000 people work in Coahuila's coal mines.

Many of these small operations remain unregulated and unsafe despite a move by Coahuila state to create the agency Promotora para el Desarrollo Minero de Coahuila to oversee small-scale coal mining. One purpose of the agency was to centralized the sale of coal to the federal electricity

utility, the Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE). "The paradox is that the medicine is worse than the sickness," Alberto Barranco wrote in the daily newspaper *El Siglo de Torreón*.

Barranco noted that the move backfired because the new scheme allowed mayors, local officials, and state legislators to gain control of these operations and create new ones. "Instead of going away, the pocitos multiplied," said the columnist. "Corruption won."

Others shared this opinion, putting the blame on the administrations of Gov. Humberto Moreira and his brother Rubén Moreira, who succeeded him in the state house.

"All these factors have combined with the irresponsibility of the state administrations of the brothers Humberto and Rubén Moreira and with the lack of enforcement of worker protections by the federal government and the companies that own the mines," the Mexico City daily newspaper *La Jornada* said in an editorial. "One has to remember that, following the accident at Pasta de Conchos, the federal government dedicated itself to defending the interests of Grupo México—owner of the mine—instead of taking actions to clarify the incident and sanction those responsible."

### *Methane gas a major issue*

Barranco also noted that the federal government bears much of the responsibility for the lack of safety, not only because of poor worker-protection enforcement but also because of its energy policies that discourage the development of methane gas extracted from the mines to create electricity.

"In its zeal to prevent competition against other established forms of energy like natural gas, liquefied petroleum gas, and shale gas, the government charges a disproportionate tax on development of the gas associated with coal, which makes it unprofitable for the industrialists," said Barranco.

Gov. Rubén Moreira has promised to push for efforts to encourage companies to remove methane gas from the mines. "In addition to offering a greater measure of safety for workers of this industry, this effort will contribute to protecting the environment," said the governor.

But critics suggest they will accept nothing less than a major overhaul of security procedures at coal-mining operation in Coahuila. Several groups—including Familia Pasta de Conchos, Equipo Nacional de Pastoral Laboral, and the Centro de Reflexión y Acción Laboral—have launched a campaign to demand that mining companies comply with federal safety guidelines.

"They have to invest in the latest technologies to guarantee the lives of the miners," the three organizations said in a joint statement. "It is not in any way acceptable that the companies condition the investment in such technologies on whether they are earning sufficient money with their operations."

The groups said mining companies should also increase compensation for the miners, who have to work in extremely dangerous conditions while receiving very low pay. Many miners receive a daily wage of 70 to 150 pesos (US\$5.30 to US\$11.40).

The three organizations faulted both the federal and state governments for failing to make mining companies accountable for their operations, including the pocitos, and to follow safety recommendations by the semi-independent Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH).

"No authority has made the effort to demand that the pocitos comply with all regulations," said

Cristina Auerbach, a spokesperson for the Familia Pasta de Conchos. "There are no security or safety measures."

One step that can be taken immediately, they said, is to close all the pocitos. Auerbach said no action has been taken because "the dead miners are not the children of Rubén Moreira, or Humberto Moreira, or [President] Felipe Calderón."

Auerbach said the mining companies were offered up to 1 million pesos (US\$76,000) in loans so they could invest in safety equipment, but only three companies have decided to take the credits.

[Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Aug. 8, 2012, reported at 13.14 pesos per US\$1.00.]

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