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LOCAL

Cargill to close Avery Island Salt Mine six weeks after fatal incident

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Cargill Deicing Technologies announced plans to end its salt mining operations at Avery Island in Iberia Parish Thursday, just over six weeks after a collapse at the mine killed two employees in December.

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The company announced the closure in a release, saying that it will halt salt production at the mine but will continue work necessary to close the mine until 2024 and will help employees find new work in the meantime.

“For over 24 years, we have been proud to be part of the Avery Island and New Iberia communities,” said Sonya Roberts, president of Cargill’s salt business.

“This was a difficult business decision, but ultimately the right one as we considered the future economics of the mine’s operation and our production capacity until the end of the year. We’d like to thank Avery Island Inc. for their partnership over those years and thank our hard-working employees who have made the mine successful.”

The total number of employees impacted by the closure is still being determined, according to Cargill.

Cargill says it was planning to end operations at the mine at the end of 2021 when its lease with Avery Island Inc. expires, but hastened the decision this month in consideration of the mine's profitability.

The move comes just six weeks after a roof collapse at the salt mine on Dec. 14 resulted in the death of two miners who were thought to be missing for two days before their bodies were found.

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The mine was shut down immediately after the incident while rescue efforts were underway, and the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration, which oversees underground mining operations across the country, began an investigation.

A preliminary report from the MSHA determined that the two miners who died were drilling to stop a water leak when the roof of one of the mine's chambers collapsed near a fault in the rock.

"On December 14, 2020, two miners died when a back failure occurred in a large intersection," the report reads. "The miners were drilling in an attempt to intercept water leaks when blocks of salt and anhydrite fell from beneath a slickenside onto the miners.

In the weeks since the mine's collapse, the company has been cited for six federal mining violations, though the fine amounts for those have not yet been determined by the MSHA.

Those violations include four citations for failures to install barriers or warning signs outside unsafe parts of the mine, as well as one citation for not correcting defects in equipment, machinery, and tools to avoid hazardous conditions and one for not clearly marking escape routes.

Spokesperson Daniel Sullivan said the citations were not related to the roof collapse and that anticipated fines were not related to the company's decision to halt operations at the mine.

The two miners were part of a group of 18 employees working in the mine when the roof collapsed. According to Cargill, 16 of those miners were able to escape without injury.

The New Iberia mine was the first rock salt mine in North America, with operations dating back to the mid-1800s, and today it employs nearly 200 people who work in three shifts. Cargill has operated the mine since 1997, and it produces more than 2 million tons of salt a year, according to Sullivan.

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Avery Island is not the only salt mine in Louisiana, as massive salt deposits underlie most of the Texas and Louisiana coastline, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

In the year before the collapse, the mine received citations for not properly securing unattended mining equipment, not maintaining two-way communications systems for underground workers and not properly halting other activities during blasting operations among many other violations that have amounted to thousands of dollars in fines.

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The salt mine was also cited for improper maintenance of escape routes in November 2019, the fine for which remains on hold with the MSHA.

The administration also fined Cargill for not maintaining safe access to all parts of the mine and proper protections around openings for travel ways inside the mine, both of which were resolved months before the collapse.

Overall, the mine's record for serious and significant citations is 20% better than the national average, according to data from the MSHA, and frequent spot inspections of the salt mine generated no citations dating back to May of this year despite multiple inspections conducted each month.

The company issued a statement prior to the discovery of the dead miners saying that its recent citations were not related to the roof collapse.

“While we are still investigating the cause of today's roof collapse, there is no indication it is related to the inspection issues identified in the recent MSHA citations,” a company spokesperson wrote in a December statement.

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