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Cargill shuts Avery Island salt mine after fatal roof collapse

BY BEN MYERS | STAFF WRITER
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Motorists stop at the toll booth at the entrance to Avery Island following a roof collapse at the Cargill salt mine Monday, December 14, 2020, in Iberia Parish.
STAFF PHOTO BY LESLIE WESTBROOK

Ben Myers

Six weeks after a roof collapse killed two workers, Cargill Deicing Technology announced on Thursday that it shuttered its salt mine at Avery Island.

The mine has not reopened since the Dec. 14 collapse, which remains under federal investigation. The company previously planned to quit production “later in 2021,” since its lease expires at the end of the year, according to a statement.

The decision to close earlier than expected stemmed from a combination of business factors, including the amount of time it would take to ramp back up to full production, according to spokesman Daniel Sullivan.

"With six weeks now behind us, considering the time to get to back to full production, low demand for road salt due to a soft winter so far, and the time remaining in our lease, we need to focus our time and energy on safely closing the facility," Sullivan said.

A total of 18 people were working underground at the mine in the early morning of Dec. 14 when the roof collapsed. All but two, 41-year-old Rene Romero and 27-year-old Lance Begnaud, made it out alive. Romero and Begnaud each had less than 30 weeks of total mining experience, according to a preliminary accident report.

Inspectors discovered at least four serious safety violations following the collapse, according to the Mine Safety Health Administration's online database. The violations pertained to hazardous ground conditions and barricades or warning signs, records show.

The company decided not to reopen after the collapse out of "an abundance of caution," Sullivan said in an email.

"We know we can operate safely," he said.

About 200 people work at the mine, and Sullivan said their employment status is still being determined. Decommissioning the mine will take at least three years, according to the company.

"There is still a significant amount of work that needs to be done at the mine to complete closure activities and maintain safety. We will work through a process to determine positions and employees

needed to support mine closure activities, which will consider employee skills and experience required," Sullivan said.

Federal law requires companies to formally notify the state within 60 days of shuttering worksite of 50 or more people. Cargill had not filed such a notice as of Jan. 19, according to state records.

The mine on Avery Island has been operating since the mid-1800s and was the first rock salt mine in North America. The mine is owned by Avery Island Inc. and has been managed by Cargill since 1997 when it acquired the lease from Azko-Nobel.

The Cargill mine at Avery Island is one of three commercial salt mines in Louisiana, and 14 in the United States. The Louisiana mines are clustered around a salt dome in Iberia and St. Mary Parish, and they collectively employ about 500 people.

Cargill also operates a salt evaporation facility in Breaux Bridge. Those facilities are not impacted by the mine's closing.

Prior to the Cargill roof collapse, the last death in a Louisiana salt mine occurred at the Cote Blanch mine in 2013, when a piece of salt fell and struck a shaftman.

Federal inspectors have found more than 50 safety violations at the Cargill mine since the start of 2020, including at least 15 that are considered serious. Yet its rate of serious violations in that time is below the national average, and the lowest among Louisiana's salt mines.

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The violations discovered after the roof collapse are not likely related to the cause of the collapse, since the results of that investigation will not be revealed until it is complete, said Kim Redding, a mine safety consultant and former MSHA inspector.

“These citations are not associated with the two fatalities. The citations that are coming for the fatalities, we won’t see those sometimes for six months,” Redding said.

Staff writer Kristen Mosbrucker contributed to this article

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