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For Immediate Release

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Johnstown, PA - U.S. Rep. John Murtha joined today with Congressman Nick Rahall of West Virginia and others to introduce a comprehensive bill to overhaul federal mine safety rules.

The "Protect America's Miners Act" incorporates conclusions from the preliminary investigation of the Sago mine.

"Twelve men died at the Sago Mine in West Virginia; since then, another 14 coal miners have died in other accidents. That means that 26 coal miners have died on the job so far this year, compared with 22 in all of 2005. These tragic numbers make it clear that we need some dramatic steps to improve coal mine safety," Murtha said.

The legislation includes the following improvements and changes:

- * Increased penalties against law-violating mine operators. The legislation would impose new fines of up to \$1 million for operators who engage in a "pattern of violations" that could lead to injury or death. It would also increase the regular schedule of fines, with the minimum fine increasing from \$60 to \$500 and the maximum fine increasing from \$60,000 to \$500,000. The legislation would also ensure that the fines are collected, rather than being allowed to remain unpaid, as they often are today.
- * Improved equipment and technology to help miners survive an underground emergency. The legislation would require better communications and tracking equipment, increased and reliable oxygen supplies, and underground refuge stations where miners can go while they await rescue.
- * Improved mine rescue teams. The legislation would ensure that mine rescue teams are familiar with the mines they cover. Mine rescue teams must be located within an hour of smaller mines(those with fewer than 36 miners) and they must be located on site at larger mines. The legislation also boosts training for rescue teams, and requires mine operators to notify MSHA within 15 minutes of a serious incident.
- * Uniform rules for accident investigations. There are currently no uniform federal rules that govern how a mine accident investigation must be conducted. This legislation would require the Labor Department to issues such rules. In addition, MSHA must hold public hearings as part of every accident investigation.
- * Rights for family members of miners killed on the job. The legislation requires the Mine Safety and Health Administration to formally consult the families of fatally injured miners during an accident investigation. And it gives those families the right to ask for an investigation from an agency other than MSHA if they so choose.

* Specific hazards. The legislation would require MSHA to promptly issue new rules to address three of the most pressing hazards in the nation's underground coal mines: the flammability of conveyor belts; the effectiveness of coal mine seals (walls that block abandoned parts of mines where methane builds up); and respirable coal dust, the cause of black lung disease.

* Focus on law enforcement, not so-called "compliance assistance." Under the Bush administration, MSHA has increasingly focused on providing mine operators with compliance assistance, rather than on enforcing the law by holding mine operators accountable for violations. In order to shift the focus back to law enforcement, the legislation establishes a user fee, paid by mining companies, as the exclusive source of funding for government compliance assistance. All other MSHA funding must be used for law enforcement.

"We were extremely fortunate that the Miracle Nine miners from Quecreek Mine came out alive in Somerset County. But that accident and the more recent tragedies make it clear: We cannot delay any longer - we must improve mining safety now," Murtha added.