

Mine Safety Spending Outlined

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Coal mining companies might have to set aside as much as a third of their combined profit from last year to increase safety spending, Energy Minister Sergei Shmatko said Thursday.

The plan to force the companies, including Rospadskaya and Evraz, to earmark 24 billion rubles (\$820 million) for safety measures over the next two years comes as 10 coal miners have died in shafts so far this year. A total of 135 miners died at work in 22 accidents last year, mostly in the Rospadskaya disaster in May — a shock that triggered the nationwide tightening of the industry's safety rules.

The country's coal mining companies, which together operate 168 mines, collectively earned a profit of 73 billion rubles last year, Shmatko said.

Shmatko made the comments at a government meeting chaired by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin that discussed progress in the national campaign to make the industry safer to work in. Other attendees included Severstal chief Alexei Mordashov, Rospadskaya director Gennady Kozovoi and SUEK chief Vladimir Rashevsky.

Ivan Mokhnachuk, chairman of the Independent Union of Coal Mining Workers, said at the meeting that suspected safety violations caused the 10 miners' deaths this year. He said the situation was especially worrisome at Russky Ugol mines, where most of the deaths occurred.

Nikolai Kutin, head of the Federal Service for Environmental, Technological and Atomic Inspection, said his subordinates, using new powers, suspended operations at coal mines scores of times last year until safety problems were rectified. The measure didn't stop the industry from increasing output by 7 percent to 323 million tons because, Kutin said, they were able to catch up.

"That's unexpected," Putin responded.

Kozovoi said Rapsadskaya was still battling the fire that broke out after the deadly methane explosion.

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