



Who Needs to Watch “Survivor”?

A carefully planned rescue operation which brought 72 potash miners safely back up the surface in Esterhazy, Saskatchewan has been hailed as “a textbook rescue”, and its lessons are being studied by mining officials in countries as far away as China.

The 72 Canadian miners were trapped a kilometre underground after a fire broke out at Mosaic Co.’s Esterhazy mine – a huge potash mining operation that covers a 20 km by 30 km area, roughly the size of Regina. When driven back by fire and toxic smoke as they tried to leave the mine at the end of their shift, 32 miners went to their nearest refuge station; 40 other miners on the underground shift headed separately to seven other refuge stations.

These refuge stations kept all the miners safe until they could be rescued. There are 21 permanent or temporary refuge stations in Mosaic’s Esterhazy mine. Each refuge station is equipped with enough oxygen supplies to last at least 36 hours, as well as water, emergency provisions, telephones, beds, and blankets. In the event of fire or smoke, they can be sealed off with moist clay.

Saskatchewan’s refuge stations have been a requirement since the 1930’s, after a fire in Ontario killed 39 miners. That all 72 of the Esterhazy miners trapped underground emerged unharmed is largely due to the effectiveness of these stations, and the coordinated efforts of the rescue teams. Some 54 people from two Mosaic mines – Esterhazy and Colonsay – as well as the nearby PotashCorp facility at Rocanville – were involved in the rescue effort.

Mining competitors such as Mosaic and PotashCorp regularly take part in cross-training programs to keep familiar with each other’s facilities, to be as prepared as possible for any emergency situations. The Saskatchewan Mining Association also conducts annual mine safety competitions to keep worker safety top of mind.

A month after the successful rescue efforts at Esterhazy, two representatives from the People’s Republic of China visited the mine, to discuss mine safety regulations and to tour the mining operations. Members of the U.S. team investigating a January mining tragedy in West Virginia were also reviewing safety practices at Esterhazy, and in particular the mine’s refuge stations. Learning more about how the mining industry helps keep its miners safe in Saskatchewan, may help protect miners in other parts of the world.

For more information about safety and mining industry, here are some websites well worth exploring.

For Saskatchewan:
The Saskatchewan Mining Association
www.saskmining.ca

For British Columbia:
The Mining Association of B.C.
www.mining.bc.ca

For Ontario:
The Ontario Mining Association
www.oma.on.ca

Mining and Aggregates Safety and Health Association (MASHA)
www.masha.on.ca