Power Company's Failure to Protect Employees Against Potential Explosion Hazards Leads to OSHA Penalties

BILLINGS, Mont. -- A Montana power company's failure to protect employees working in areas with potentially explosive accumulations of coal dust has led the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to issue citations and $181,000 in proposed penalties against the company. The citations were issued Feb. 28 by OSHA's Billings area office against PPL Montana LLC, Colstrip, following an investigation that began on August 29, 2001 after a coal dust explosion injured two PPL employees.

• OSHA cited PPL Montana for two willful violations for knowingly rendering conveyor safety devices inoperable along with knowingly permitting employees to use unsuitable electrical tools in locations having a coal dust explosion hazard. Proposed penalties total $125,000 for the two alleged willful violations.
• A total of $56,000 in penalties was proposed for eight alleged serious violations: lack of documentation of hazardous classified locations; excessive accumulations of explosive coal dust; failure to use temporary precautions when a fixed fire extinguishing system becomes inoperable; failure to properly train employees in safety related work practices; failure to affix lockout devices to each energy isolating device; failure to properly maintain interlocks and other safety devices; failure to identify emergency stop devices; and failure to safely control sources of ignition to prevent ignition of a combustible atmosphere.
• "This accident and the unsafe conditions discovered during the inspection could have been avoided by adherence to recognized safe work practices and OSHA regulations," said David DiTommaso, OSHA area director in Billings.
Willful violations are those committed with an intentional disregard of, or plain indifference to, the requirements of the Occupational Safety and Health Act. A serious violation is one committed where there is substantial probability that death or serious physical harm could result, and the employer knew or should have known of the hazard.

PPL Montana has 15 working days from receipt of the citations to request an informal conference with the OSHA area director, or to contest the citations and proposed penalties before the independent Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission.