

FEDERAL MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH REVIEW COMMISSION

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WASHINGTON, DC 20001

June 18, 2008

SECRETARY OF LABOR,	:	
MINE SAFETY AND HEALTH	:	
ADMINISTRATION (MSHA)	:	Docket No. VA 2008-258
	:	A.C. No. 44-06199-135474
v.	:	
	:	
RED RIVER COAL COMPANY, INC.	:	

BEFORE: Duffy, Chairman; Jordan, Young, and Cohen, Commissioners

ORDER

BY THE COMMISSION:

This matter arises under the Federal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1977, 30 U.S.C. § 801 et seq. (2000) (“Mine Act”). On May 1, 2008, the Commission received from Red River Coal Company, Inc. (“Red River”) a letter seeking to reopen a penalty assessment that may have become a final order of the Commission pursuant to section 105(a) of the Mine Act, 30 U.S.C. § 815(a).

Under section 105(a) of the Mine Act, an operator who wishes to contest a proposed penalty must notify the Secretary of Labor no later than 30 days after receiving the proposed penalty assessment. If the operator fails to notify the Secretary, the proposed penalty assessment is deemed a final order of the Commission. 30 U.S.C. § 815(a).

On January 8, 2008, the Department of Labor’s Mine Safety and Health Administration (“MSHA”) issued Proposed Assessment No. 000135474 to Red River, which proposed civil penalties for several citations. Red River states that it mailed its contest of the proposed assessment on February 5, 2008, but that it did not receive a response from MSHA until it received a letter from MSHA dated April 9, 2008, stating that Red River had failed to timely contest the proposed assessment. While the Secretary states that she does not oppose Red River’s request to reopen, she notes that she has no record of receiving Red River’s contest of the penalty assessment.

We have held that in appropriate circumstances, we possess jurisdiction to reopen uncontested assessments that have become final Commission orders under section 105(a). *Jim Walter Res., Inc.*, 15 FMSHRC 782, 786-89 (May 1993) (“*JWR*”). In evaluating requests to reopen final section 105(a) orders, the Commission has found guidance in Rule 60(b) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure under which, for example, a party could be entitled to relief from a final order of the Commission on the basis of inadvertence or mistake. *See* 29 C.F.R. § 2700.1(b) (“the Commission and its Judges shall be guided so far as practicable by the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure”); *JWR*, 15 FMSHRC at 787. We have also observed that default is a harsh remedy and that, if the defaulting party can make a showing of good cause for a failure to timely respond, the case may be reopened and appropriate proceedings on the merits permitted. *See Coal Prep. Servs., Inc.*, 17 FMSHRC 1529, 1530 (Sept. 1995).

Having reviewed Red River’s request and the Secretary’s response, in the interests of justice, we remand this matter to the Chief Administrative Law Judge for a determination of whether Red River timely contested the penalty proposal and, if not, whether good cause exists for granting relief from the final order. If it is determined that relief from the final order is appropriate, this case shall proceed pursuant to the Mine Act and the Commission’s Procedural Rules, 29 C.F.R. Part 2700.

Michael F. Duffy, Chairman

Mary Lu Jordan, Commissioner

Michael G. Young, Commissioner

Robert F. Cohen, Jr., Commissioner

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