

**MADISON, WV (December 20, 2018)** – Colonel Jan Cahill of the West Virginia State Police, Boone County Sheriff Randall White, Boone County Prosecutor Keith Randolph, the West Virginia Office of Miner’s Health Safety and Training Director Eugene White, and Joe Evans of Blackhawk Mining jointly release this statement detailing the incident and search for Wes Blackburn at the Wells Complex underground mine near Wharton, West Virginia.

On Monday, November 26<sup>th</sup>, the Wharton Fire Chief and Blackhawk Mine employee Mark White notified Boone County 911 of a female passed out in a car near the Wells Complex Lightfoot #1 mine opening. The Lightfoot #1 mine had been out of operation for nearly 20 years. Suspecting a theft of copper from the mine in progress, the Boone County Sheriff’s office traveled to the scene. Once on scene, deputies met with the female later identified as Amanda Pennington. Pennington confirmed that she dropped two men off at the mine entrance, and that the men had entered the mine nearby. The two men in the mine were identified by Pennington as Gary Gibson and Wes Blackburn.

Breaking into underground mines has proven a significant issue for Boone County and other coalfield communities. People who do so are normally in search of copper to steal and scrap for cash. This case, and other recent cases highlight to the danger to stealing copper from the mines – not just for the thief but for rescuers and first responders also.

Following Pennington’s arrest at the scene, law enforcement and Blackhawk mine employees located a chiseled opening allowing access into the mine. The chiseled opening measured approximately 16 x 16 inches. After finding the opening, Blackhawk mining placed cameras near the opening and representatives of the company and law enforcement remained in the area searching for the two men.

About 7 hours after the original call to Boone County 911, Chief Deputy Chad Barker located a man, later identified as Gary Gibson, standing next to a guardrail about a ¼ mile from the Wells Complex mine opening. Gibson was picked up by deputies and explained that he was one of the men deputies were looking for that evening. Upon request, Gibson cooperated with deputies by re-tracing the steps he and Wes Blackburn took at the mine. Gibson also confirmed that he had not seen Wes Blackburn since noon – some 8 hours prior.

Gibson showed deputies of a second entrance to the mine some 700 feet from the sealed and chiseled entrance. The second opening had been unknown to deputies until Gibson took them to the location. To gain access to the mine via the second entrance, Gibson described sliding under a wire enclosure and down an earthen dam to the mine opening several feet below. Gibson confirmed to deputies that he last saw Wes Blackburn entering the mine through the chiseled opening.

In the meantime, Blackhawk Mining contacted the West Virginia Office of Miner’s Health Safety and Training (MHST) to notify them of the situation regarding the possibility that one person may be in the Lightfoot #1 mine. Eugene White, Director of MHST organized a team of rescuers to travel to the location to assess the ongoing situation.

The following day, November 27<sup>th</sup>, representatives of Blackhawk and the Boone County Sheriff's Department met with family of Wes Blackburn at the Lightfoot #1 mine. It was learned at that time that a family member had entered the mine without authority in search of Wes Blackburn. The family member entered the mine through the earthen dam entrance and walked a significant section of the mine before conditions turned him away. He confirmed that he saw no sign of Wes Blackburn in the mine nor did he get any type of response from shouts for his brother.

That same day, the MSHT met at the Lightfoot #1 mine opening and learned that the two separate and only accessible openings to the mine had significant foot traffic indicating that the abandoned mine had been accessed by one or more people. The MSHT also noted that the mine openings were "outgassing" – a term used to denote that air was exiting the mine at the openings. In addition, the mine registered an oxygen content of 19%.

On November 28<sup>th</sup>, Blackhawk representatives met with the family member that entered the mine the day prior. The meeting was to review maps of the mine to attempt to locate the area the family member searched for Wes Blackburn. After meeting with the family and reviewing the maps, Blackhawk and the MSHT decided that a team of rescuers would enter the mine the following day to search for Wes Blackburn. That same day, the family members filed a missing person report with the West Virginia State Police.

On the morning of November 29<sup>th</sup>, the team of rescuers and Blackhawk employees assembled at the mine entrance. Once there, the 16 x 16 inch chiseled opening in the entrance was enlarged to allow rescuers with their equipment to access the mine where Wes Blackburn was last seen 3 days earlier. By 10:00 a.m., a team of rescuers made up of members from Blackhawk Mining and WV MHS&T entered the mine with a second team on standby just outside the entrance.

The team, once inside the mine shaft, traveled left for some distance until the team encountered various roof falls that prevented the team from continuing forward. The team then attempted to travel to the right of the entrance through a crossover in an effort to connect with the second entrance – the earthen dam entrance. Before connecting with the second entrance, the team located another series of roof falls that prevented them further safe travel.

After encountering the second set of roof falls, the rescue team withdrew from the dangerous situation without finding Wes Blackburn. The team did find signs that one or more persons had been in the mine and crossed the roof falls. The rescue team then traveled to the second entrance to the mine – the earthen dam entrance – to assess the possibility of entering the mine from that location. Eugene White confirmed that the second entrance was too dangerous to enter considering the safety of the rescue team.

Joe Evans of Blackhawk Mining stated that he felt confident "that all efforts to locate Wes Blackburn by the Boone County Sheriff's Department and the State Police had been expended." He went on to describe the significant and dangerous efforts made by Blackhawk Mining and the MSHT to locate Wes Blackburn in the Lightfoot #1 mine. Those sentiments were echoed by

Eugene White who said that the rescue team did all that it could safely do but the “conditions proved too dangerous and unsafe to continue further search in the mine.”

The West Virginia State Police and the Boone County Sheriff’s Department continue to follow-up leads concerning the whereabouts of Wes Blackburn. Amanda Pennington currently stands charged with the felony crime of Conspiracy to Break and Enter an underground mine. Gary Gibson is charged with Breaking and Entering an underground mine and Conspiracy. Their cases await presentment to a Boone County grand jury.