No coal has ever been mined beneath the city of Bluefield during the city’s 117-year history, but thanks to the natural gravity hump that led Norfolk & Western surveyors to decide on Bluefield as the site for its western-most shops, more coal has flowed through Bluefield than any other city in the region.

Time hasn’t changed the flow of coal through Bluefield, but coal’s future in the rapidly growing global energy market is changing. Still, the industry is cyclical and the price of spot market steam coal in the fall of 2006 is much lower than it was just a year before. And although metallurgical coal still provides a premium blend to steel-makers worldwide, the prices tend to follow the general steam coal market.

Last year ended on a high note with West Virginia experiencing its best year in terms of coal mine safety, but 2006 started with a tragedy the likes of which the coalfields haven’t seen in some time. On January 2, 2006, as most of America was enjoying the promise of a new year and most West Virginians were ready to cheer for the success of the West Virginia University Mountaineer football team, 13 coal miners at the Sago Mine were trapped underground in a mine explosion. Only one man – Randal McCloy – survived with the whole world watching, praying and revisiting mine safety matters over and over and over again in their minds and their hearts.

The Sago disaster didn’t sour the world’s hunger for energy. It did, however, send state and federal inspectors, mine owners and operators, as well as coal miners back to revisit the state of safety regulations and to take a comprehensive look at what is right and what is wrong with the coal industry. Not everyone has been satisfied with the conclusions to date, but the industry has been working to find a solution. It was in that context that the Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce decided to host the Bluefield Coal Symposium from Sept. 27 through Sept. 29.

“I think one thing the public doesn’t understand about the coal industry is that the industry itself is very passionate about safety,” Bill Reid, chairman of the symposium, said. “I hope that commitment to safety is one of the messages that filters out to the public from this symposium.”

Reid was the former head of EIMCO’s mine machinery plant in Bluefield. He is the editor/publisher of “Coal News,” a monthly publication based in Bluefield.

“This was not just an everything’s great kind of meeting,” Reid said. “It was a real in-depth, and sometimes very personal investigation into what’s taking place in the coal industry in the wake of the tragedies we experienced earlier this year. Hopefully, the people who attended this meeting will gain something from the ideas they heard and they will go back to their mines and show their workforces what is taking shape in terms of industry safety. Hopefully, they’ll do things that will help them feel good at home every night.”

Coal industry A-list speakers shared their views in a frank and open free-flow exchange of ideas. Don Blankenship, president and CEO of Massey Energy, let fly the opening salvo at the symposium.
reception on Wednesday evening by blasting American foreign policy in the Middle East, claiming regulators have zeroed in on the wrong problems in the coal industry, promoting coal as a tool for world peace and discussing Massey's on-going commitment to coal mine safety that he said exceeds state and federal regulations in several areas.

“Dust management doesn’t solve problems,” Blankenship said. “U.S. technology is too busy taking dust samples and fighting wars to keep the oil flowing.” He said that it is “sad” that the nation is “willing to send children to Iraq to fight a war, but not willing to issue a (permit for) a valley fill.” He said Americans should be proud that coal is the nation’s “anchor energy” and that cheap electricity “builds prosperity.” Blankenship gave a rather thorough presentation on Massey’s safety initiatives, encouraged mine operators attending the event to take a proactive position in the advancement of coal mine safety and said that he is “betting millions of dollars” on the up-coming election because he believes the state needs to change.

On the following evening, Gov. Joe Manchin served as the symposium dinner speaker. Manchin talked about coal mine safety issues in the wake of coal mining tragedies that rocked the nation earlier this year.

“No one associated with our state's coal industry will ever forget the early months of 2006 as we experienced a series of mining tragedies – notably the Sago mine explosion that took the lives of 12 miners and the fire at the Aracoma mine that claimed two lives,” Manchin said. He said he went to the Sago disaster because, “I felt that I could be of assistance after having experienced personal loss during the 1968 Farmington disaster.

“But the situation became a feeding frenzy of national media,” he said. “And, you know, no one gave me a book on how to deal with such a tragedy when I became governor. I did the best I could.” Manchin’s message was upbeat and positive about West Virginia’s coal industry and how the state can connect with its new-found prominence in the national energy picture. He said he was proud of the legislature’s passage of Senate Bill 247 and called it “truly historic and set the tone for a series of reforms on both the state and federal level that will have a real and lasting impact on miners and their families for many years to come.”

Debbie Hamner and her daughter, Sara (Hamner) Bailey (right), traveled to Bluefield from their home in Buckhannon to attend the symposium in hopes of finding answers to the question that has dominated their hearts and minds since January 2, when their husband and father, George Hamner, didn’t make it home from work at the Sago Mine.

“He was my best friend,” Hamner said of her husband of 32 years. She said her husband enjoyed his family, working on their farm as well as outdoor sports of all kinds. “He loved to mine coal,” she said. She expressed her appreciation for all the people who have given their support to her, her family, and all the families of the coal miners who died in the Sago disaster. “All coal miners are family,” she said. “Coal gets in your blood.”

Mrs. Hamner did not find the answer she was looking for during the safety session of the symposium that included presentations by top state and federal mine safety agencies – a group that included Ray McKinney, district manager, District 5, Mine Safety and Health Administration, Richard Gates, district manager, District 2, MSHA, Birmingham, Ala., Ron Wooten, director West Virginia Office of Miners’ Health Safety and Training, Allen Dupree, assistant district manager, District 5, MSHA, and Jeff Welsh, deputy director NIOSH, Pittsburgh, Pa.

“We were hoping for an update on Sago,” Hamner said. “That didn’t happen.” She said that the widows of the Sago coal miners gather together regularly to have lunch and talk. “If we can speak out on (the topic of safety) that’s what we want to do,” she said.

Every speaker hammered home the idea of coal mine safety. Ronald G. Stovash, senior vice president of Consol Energy Inc., noted that the industry has “made great strides” in the area of safety since the early 1900s when thousands of coal miners were dying on the job each year. He said that some of the new safety requirements this year “are already being done,” and that he hoped the several agencies can develop “consistent, uniform safety legislation.”

The experts dissected a broad range of safety issues. Juliette Hill, a mining engineer with MSHA and Mark Skiles, MSHA director of technical support, described what is being done to address various safety concerns, while Dr. R. Larry Grayson, chairman of the commission established by the National Mining Association to examine the Sago disaster, gave a report on the NMA’s recommendations.

The final session was anything but a wrap-up. Dan Gerkin, senior vice president of government and political affairs, provided insights into the state of the coal industry in the global energy picture. Bill Raney, president of the West Virginia Coal Association, Bill Caylor, president of the Kentucky Coal Association and Tommy Hudson, president of the Virginia Coal Association, each provided updates on the state of the coal industry in their respective states. John Feddock, senior vice president, Marshall Miller & Associates, gave a presentation on safety measures in Kentucky's retreat mining program.

“We have been developing a lot of these ideas since the Sago tragedy,” Jimmy Gianato, director of the West Virginia Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management said. “When it comes to safety, we’re not going to follow the train. We're going to lead it.”

Industry leaders like Dan Pochick, president of Rish Equipment, Jack Fairchild Jr., of Fairchild International, Marshall Miller, and Gene Bailey, a retired Consol executive, were universal in their praise for the symposium.

“Communications and developing a meaningful dialogue with regulatory agencies is a very important part of the safety process,” Pochick said.

The Chamber designed the symposium – just like its predecessor event, the biennial Bluefield Coal Rally -- to serve as a forum for topics of importance to the coal industry on non-Bluefield Coal Show years. The Bluefield Coal Show will be in September of 2007.
2006 Bluefield Symposium Focused on Safety Concerns in the Mines

“The response from the more than 200 in attendance was overwhelming. Attendees were impressed with the speakers which included Gov. Joe Manchin and CEO Don Blankenship of Massey Energy, pointing out that they were well versed in experience and coal background.

“The symposium was a takeoff from the original Bluefield Coal rally, and the new format presented the right venue for the safety topic. This event is held on the off-year of the biennial Bluefield Coal Show. It created a great amount of interest among people in the coal industry, and the coal associations were very supportive.

“One committee person suggested we start with the coal associations and make it a two full-day symposium. However, we have a golf tournament in conjunction with the conference and this will probably be part of the next event. This was a first for the exhibitors who added to the many safety topics and showed the most up-to-date equipment and provided needed information to the attendees.

“The feedback we’re getting indicates the symposium was a great success. It provided excellent opportunities for not only making new contacts, but understanding roles, accomplishments and challenges in the field of providing greater safety at the nation’s coal mines.

“We, at the Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce, would like to thank our sponsors--DBT, Joy Mining Machinery, Fairchild International, Johnson Industries, Marshall Miller & Associates, Phillips Machine, Pemco Corporation, Petroleum Products, Connweld and Victaulic.”
– Debbie Maynard

The Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce, sponsor of the Bluefield Coal Show, is currently working on the plans for the Bluefield Coal Show - Sept. 12, 13, 14, 2007.
"The Bluefield Coal Symposium presented insights in how much new reliable technology is needed in the coal industry. Safety of our coal miners should be our #1 priority as we continue to design and manufacture new products. We at AMR are in the process of working with coal companies and the regulatory bodies in the design of a product that would be able to track and locate any miner trapped underground. With support from the industry, as we heard this week, our process from the design stage to manufacturing stage will be expedited."

– Bob Saxton, American Mine Research

David Graf and David Johnson of American Mine Research
“Bradford Stuart Industries Inc. attended the Bluefield Safety Symposium and found there were a lot of dedicated people in the coal industry working hard to improve safety. I also had the pleasure to meet and have lunch with Debbie and her daughter Sara Hamner. Debbie’s husband perished in the Sago disaster. I would like to express my heartfelt condolences to them and the other families of the mine disasters. These are the people that we must keep in our hearts and work hard to eliminate these types of disasters. Our GHS system was well received and we had some good suggestions to help us in the development of this product. I would like to say thanks to Bluefield Chamber of Commerce on a well put together symposium.”
– James Ball, President Bradford Stuart Industries

“Bradford Stuart Industries is pleased to be a part of such a wonderful group of individuals who share a strong passion and dedication for coal mine safety.”
– Beth Terranova, Coal People Magazine

“The Bluefield Coal Symposium was a great opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with other professionals in the mining industry. CAB is constantly striving to introduce new products and upgrade the quality of its’ existing product line to improve mine safety. Over the past year CAB has introduced the Aircraft Cable Lifeline, Rescue Tag Line and a variety of high-visibility, padded self rescuer bags.”

David Hamilton of CAB

“The symposium has provided us a way to stay abreast of the many issues and events happening in our industry. With so much sketchy and biased press, we need a venue such as this to be able to have accurate information to enable us to live and work in our industry, which is now changing almost daily.”
– Ed Barber
Strata Mine Services, Inc

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Beth Terranova and Gov. Joe Machin
American Commercial, Inc. was proud to participate in the Bluefield Coal Symposium. The papers given were very informative and can educate us all to make a safer, more productive work environment. It is an extremely positive atmosphere that makes the future of coal and related industries more bright. We look forward to a great turnout at the 2007 Bluefield Coal Show and would like to welcome everyone to visit our booth.

– Kit Quinn
Sales Manager, Eastern Mining

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Jeremy Fairchild, Jack Fairchild, Jr., Gary Fairchild of Fairchild International

Lewis McCoy, Don Pannell, Chuck Edwards of CSE Corporation

Jack Fairchild, Jr., Gary Fairchild, Ray McKinney, Speaker for MSHA,
Chris Adkins and Jim Faunda of Massey Energy

Tommy McCormick and Dwayne Towery of Gamma Services International

Tom Hughes of Hughes Supply, Larry Murray, Sr. of Marco North America
“We thought this was a great format for improving safety in the mining industry. Both dinner speakers, Governor Manchin & Don Blankinship had great ideas & showed their passion for improving safety. It also was interesting to see the new technology that is available now that help save lives. You come away from this meeting with the knowledge that management, government, mine workers & the technology industry all have the same goal. No work related injury.”

–Danny Vance – Service Pump & Supply
Mine Radio Systems Solidifies Industry Leadership with U.S. Distribution Agreement

Mine Radio Systems Inc., a world leader in the manufacture and installation of underground voice, data and video communications systems, is announcing a significant expansion of its sales and service capabilities in the U.S. mining industry following the appointment of a major American distributor.

United Central Industrial Supply Company of Bristol, Virginia has become the exclusive distributor for MRS including its high speed, internet capable, communication systems for underground mines and confined spaces. United Central will distribute the MultiCOM, FLEXCOM and FLEXCOM CMTS systems and related products from its network of 22 warehousing facilities, strategically located to effectively service mining regions throughout the United States.

Mine Radio Systems Vice-President, Ken Morrell, says the agreement with United Central is an ideal fit.

“There is not another company with the same knowledge and penetration of the American mining industry as United Central,” says Morrell. “In addition to the obvious benefits of developing our U.S. market, we’re also excited to be associated with a company that’s as committed as we are to every aspect of customer service.”

Morrell says another advantage of the United Central distributorship is the company’s close ties in the U.S. coal industry where he sees tremendous potential for MRS underground communications products.

United Central Industrial Supply is the largest, independent mining supply distribution company in North America. The company says the cornerstone of its success has always been its emphasis on customer service through the efficient delivery of quality products at competitive prices, made possible through its multi-million dollar inventory and nationwide distribution network.

Said United Central’s President & CEO, Darrell H. Cole, “United Central is proud to be the exclusive distributor of Mine Radio Systems products. Their mine communications systems are second to none and we look forward to a long and prosperous business relationship. This relationship will certainly benefit our valued customers in the mining industry.”

Mine Radio Systems Inc. is an ISO 9001-2000 registered company with integrated mine management and operational system installations in more than forty five countries and has offices in Canada, the U.S., Australia, South Africa, Europe and Mexico. Its core capabilities are enhanced through a number of strategic business partnerships with other industry leaders.

-For more information contact: Mr. Ken Morrell, Mine Radio Systems Inc. at +1-905-640-1839 or ken_morrell@mineradio.com