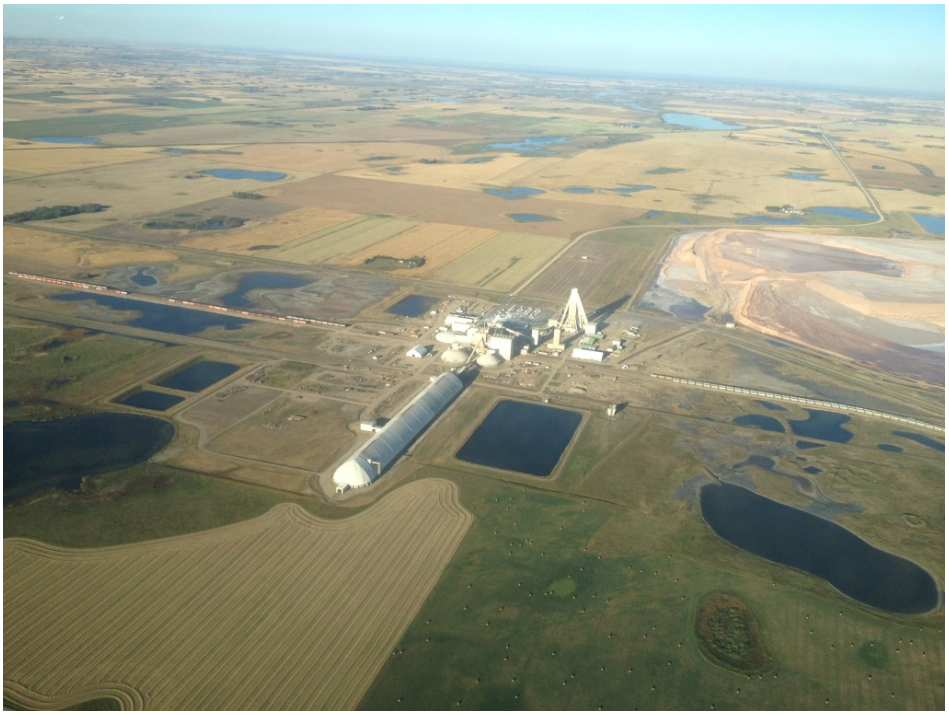
Underscoring the importance of safety: Mining industry seeks to be the best

October 7, 2014 - Features - Tagged: Allan mine, burnt telephone cable, Mine safety, miners trapped underground, PotashCorp, The International Minerals Innovation Institute, United Steel Workers Local 7689, University of Saskatchewan - no comments

By Melanie Franner



Aerial of PotashCorp's Allan mine.

The recent incident that saw 96 workers trapped underground for 30 hours at PotashCorp.'s Allan mine just east of Saskatoon has brought the issue of safety once more to the forefront of public – and industry – attention. The incident was apparently caused when a one-ton water truck caught on fire underground.

"This was the first incident in 10 years where miners were caught underground in the Allan mine," states Larry Long, general manager, Allan Mine, PotashCorp, who adds that the mine has been operational since 1968. "From the standpoint of the mine rescue, everyone did a great job. From an equipment perspective, we are investigating the incident to determine the cause of the fire."

As per usual, company representatives sat down with the Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S) people to review the event and look at "lessons learned".

Practice makes perfect

"We regularly practice drills for these types of incidents, so when this happened, the workers just assumed it was another drill," explains Ron St. Pierre, president of United Steel Workers Local 7689. "There was no panic. Everybody just did what they were supposed to do, which is to go to a shelter area or to create a dead-end zone area where there is no air circulation."

The burnt telephone cables meant that communication was lost with 14 of the 96 workers, necessitating that someone go down into the mine to physically verify their location. The burning equipment also affected the mine's air quality and only recently, over a week after the September 10th incident, is the mine becoming fully operational again.

Thankfully, the incident did not result in any injuries or fatalities.

According to St. Pierre, companies like PotashCorp invest significant resources in their in-house safety programs, money which he thinks could be better spent on the union's own OH&S committees.

"We believe that spending money on any type of safety program is a good thing but that a lot of these resources could be better spent," he explains.

St. Pierre goes on to say that the industry has made a lot of headway when it comes to reducing the number of mining injuries, but that it has yet to make progress on the number of fatalities.

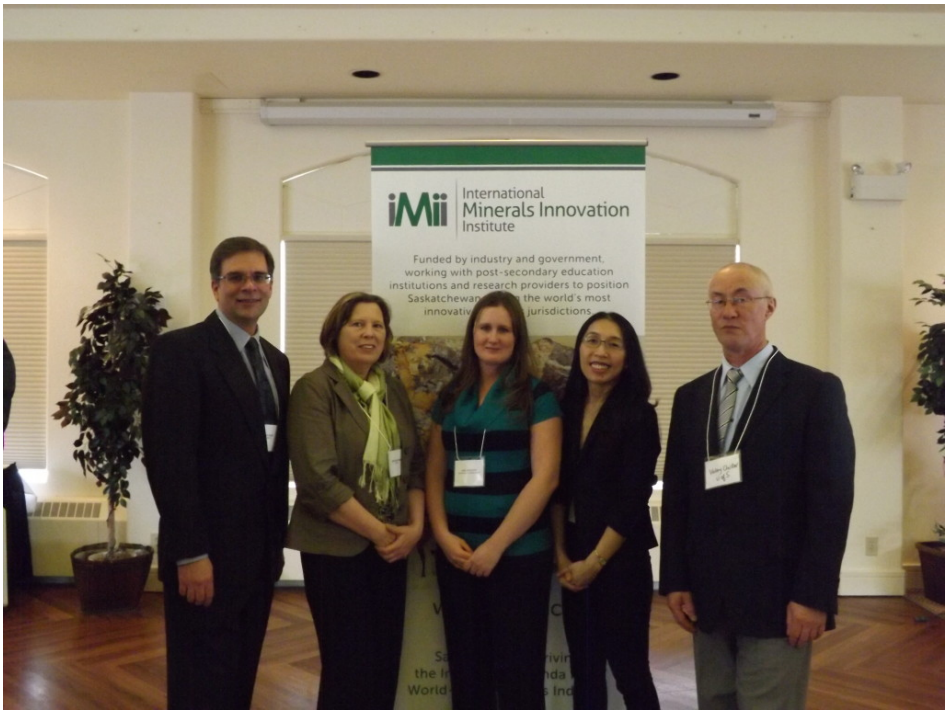
"We've been mining potash in Saskatchewan for 50 years and we've had 52 fatalities during that time," he says. "We're averaging one fatality per year."

The psychology of safety

A new research study may shed additional light on mining safety – both the technical and psychological side of it.

The International Minerals Innovation Institute (IMII) announced $786,000 in funding for a joint project between the University of Saskatchewan's (U of S) Department of Psychology and SIAST. The project is intended to help make the Saskatchewan mining industry a world leader in safety.

"Safety is a primary concern in all aspects of our lives," explains Professor Valery Chirkov, U of S, who will head up the study, along with SIAST nursing co-ordinator Lyle Grant. "Unfortunately, we don't have a very deep, elaborative theory of safe human behavior, or of why people continue to break the safety rules."



IMII Safety Research Team

Chirkov cites the example of people driving without a seatbelt or while texting. There are reasons why people chose to avoid safety measures, he says. He also cites the example of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster in Ukraine.

"The atomic energy people who went in to investigate the incident coined the term 'safety culture'," he explains. "They found that safety wasn't ignored so much on an individual level, but on an organizational

level. And, that this played a factor in the incident. Safety culture is a pure social phenomenon."

The two-year research study will begin with a broad screening of the global literature available on the topic and will include an examination of six Saskatchewan mines in terms of their safety programs, practices, attitudes, and cultures. SIAST's Nursing Department has expertise in nursing safety and the study intends to transfer that expertise over to the mining industry.

Chirkov's team will focus more on the industry's social, cultural and personal factors as they relate to risk behaviour and safety practices, including the theory of human behaviour and human motivation.

"This project gives us a very unique opportunity to make a very good contribution to the topic of safety – intellectually and practically," concludes Chirkov. "This is what we are so excited about."

The study also holds the potential for further investigation in a "Phase 2", once the initial phase uncovers potential areas warranting further research.

Chirkov anticipates that the study will be complete in mid-2016.

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