

# The Salt Lake Tribune

## **Miner's death is uranium industry's first since 1998**

**Accident in San Juan County occurs as mining companies ramp up production hoping for price increase.**

By Mike Gorrell  
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A federal Mine Safety & Health Administration investigation has begun into a fatal accident Wednesday at the Pandora uranium mine near La Sal, San Juan County.

Hunter Diehl, 28, of Moab, became the first uranium miner to die in the United States since 1998. He was hit in the back by a boulder while using a long crowbar to dislodge other pieces of rock, broken up by earlier blasting, from a mining face in the underground operation.

MSHA spokeswoman Amy Louviere said the lead accident investigator, Melvin Lapin from the agency's Topeka, Kan., field office, was scheduled for a mid-afternoon arrival Thursday at the mine site southeast of Moab.

An MSHA inspector from Salt Lake City had issued a shutdown order, secured the site and gathered preliminary information after the 7:30 a.m. Wednesday accident.

San Juan County Sheriff Mike Lacy said a co-worker came to Diehl's aid after seeing the victim blinking his head-lamp light. They talked briefly. The co-worker went for help, but when he returned, Diehl was unconscious. The victim later stopped breathing and was pronounced dead at San Juan County Hospital in Monticello.

Diehl's family did not respond Thursday to a request for comment. But his sister made arrangements with Spanish Valley Mortuary in Moab for a June 5 service at the city's River of Life Christian Church.

While Lapin's investigation will zero in on details of the fatal roof fall, preliminary information indicates the accident was similar to a Nov. 4, 1998, rock fall that killed the last uranium miner.

Jimmy Duwayne Dial, 36, died in the Sunday Mine Complex about 35 miles from Dove Creek in Dolores County, Colo., just east of San Juan County. Like Diehl, Dial was doing a mining job known as "scaling," peeling loose rocks from explosives-fractured faces, when a 2,500-pound block of rock broke loose and fell on him, MSHA reported.

Dial's death occurred at a time when uranium mining was foundering in the United States, driven down by uranium prices that bottomed out in 2001 at \$8 per pound.

Prices have rebounded considerably in the past decade, reaching \$70 per pound in April 2008, said a Utah Geological Survey report by Ken Krahulec, called "A New Uranium Boom?" But the value of uranium has sputtered since then, falling to \$40 a pound now.

Still, uranium mining operations have grown.

The Pandora mine where Diehl worked had 57 employees in the first quarter of 2010, 31 working underground. It had resumed operations late in 2006 with 10 employees, half underground.

Tom Munson, a Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining reclamation specialist, said "one of my largest workloads" involves processing about 60 permit requests for uranium exploration, development and mining. He does not regulate the mining itself, but regulates the mine's waste piles, impacts on surrounding hydrology and reclamation plans.

He said Pandora's mine operator, Reliance Resources LLC, was "trying to get everything ready" for prices to pick up and had hired and trained quite a few miners. "It's been a real boon to the economy.

"But the price of uranium is still depressed," Munson added. "The companies are waiting for that next price jump."

Nuclear power advocates say the Gulf of Mexico oil spill is compelling many, including environmentalists, to view nuclear power more favorably. One advocate, The Investor Relations Group, reiterated that stance in a news release Thursday.

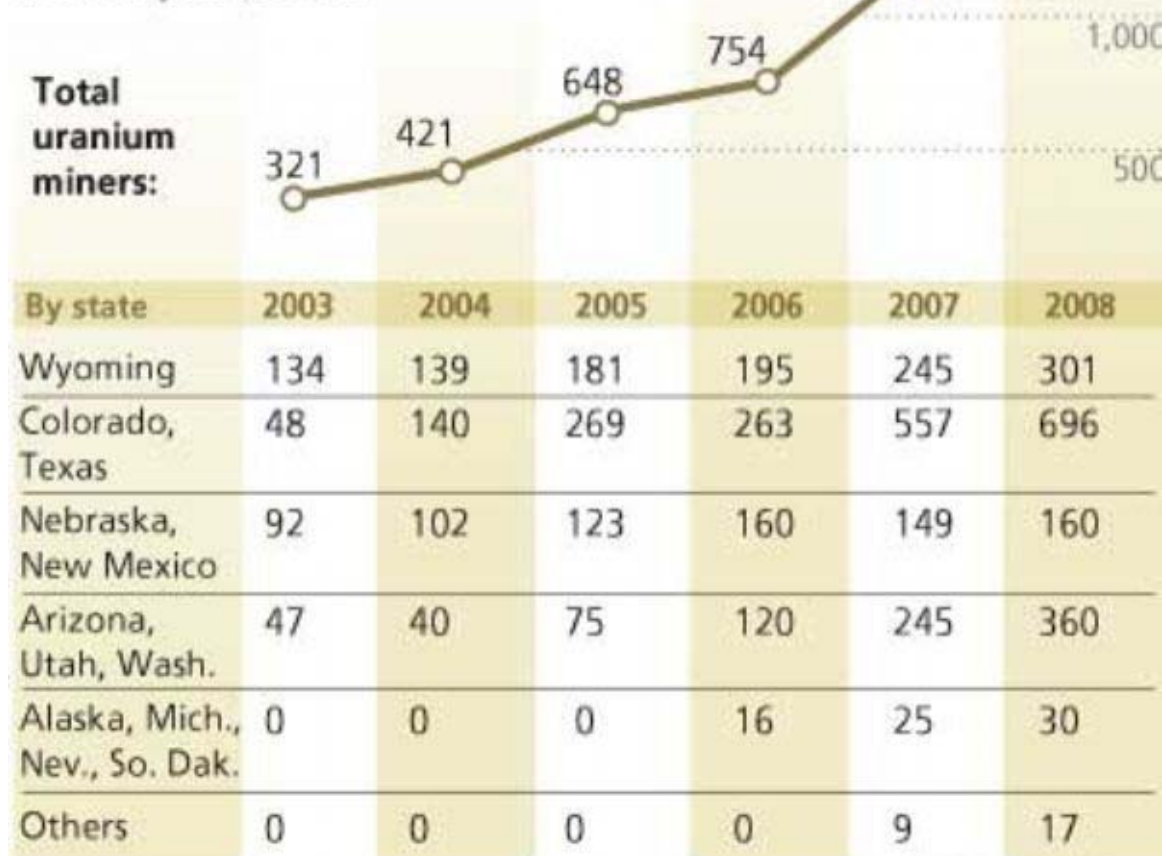
But Taylor McKinnon of the Flagstaff, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity, attacked the Pandora mine's safety record (five workers had

lost-time injuries last year).

"This event serves as a heartbreaking reminder of the cost that new uranium mining will exact on human life, as it has for decades past on the Colorado Plateau," he added.

## Uranium mining jobs

The number of uranium miners employed has increased almost fivefold in a five year period.



Source: Ux Consulting

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