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03-28, Local: Official says new system will put out 50year coal fire

By JIM HARDIN

The chief executive officer of Longview-based U.S. Foam Technologies Inc. is confident his new "Hellfighter System" will extinguish in only two weeks a coal mine fire in Utah that's been burning for 50 years.

"That's absolutely going to be a springboard for us," said Al Ozment. "This will take us all over the world."

Ozment talks about "rewriting history" because coal mine fires are burning all over the world, and there has been no effective method to extinguish them — until now, Ozment said, with his new system that consists of foam, water and air.

The system, he said, features a foam solution that is mixed with water. When the foam and water solution reach the nozzle, which is in the pressurized coal mine, air is injected under high pressure. The foam solution, which Ozment said has the consistency of shaving cream, is injected through the nozzle and seeps into every square inch of the mine.

Ozment said a 1996 manual, which is considered to be the bible of coal mine firefighting, states that "high expansion foam has not yet extinguished a real mine fire."

He said that is no longer a true statement because his company used foam to extinguish a fire in Utah's Skyline Mine in October 2002. Ozment said he's been "hush, hush until now" about the 2002 success because of patent applications.

Ozment said he received an emergency call at 11:30 p.m. on a Friday night from mine officials at Utah's Skyline Mine. Ozment said he learned that mine operators had attempted numerous techniques over three weeks to extinguish the mine fire, but they were unsuccessful at every turn. After an exchange of questions and answers, Ozment assured mine officials that U.S. Foam engineers would find a solution to their problem.

Throughout the night, Ozment said, he and his top engineers worked and calculated the needs and requirements. He said they came up with a concept that would provide a viable solution and suppression of the mine fire. The concept, he said, involved developing several hundred thousand feet of foam which would be pumped into the burning coal mine.

After operating the "Hellfighter System" for only 24 hours, Ozment said, mine operators reported that the mine fire was out.

In a news release, Ozment stated that mine officials said, "We are still pumping with your system ... It all looks like shaving cream ... The fire is out and we are just taking precautions. We hope to be back to work tomorrow."

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"It didn't just work. It worked fantastically," Ozment said of the "Hellfighter System."

"I had no idea what the coal mine fire problem was in the United States until then," he said. "By suppressing one fire, I knew pretty quickly we had a valuable piece of equipment. I didn't know how valuable until I started researching the coal mining industry ... Coal mine fires have been a problem as long as they've been mining coal."

In 1999, Ozment said, there were 150 registered coal mine fires in the United States. Most are in Pennsylvania, he said, but coal mine fires also are burning in Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Ohio, West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee. China and India also are hot spots with serious coal mine fires. China loses \$2.1 billion in coal annually because of coal mine fires, Ozment said.

Coal mine fires, Ozment said, result in loss of lives and deplete natural resources. And experts report, he said, that coal mine fires are a major contributor to global warming.

Ozment said he will be in Utah in two weeks to work out final details of a contract with the state. He's also been in contact with representatives from Colorado, Kentucky and Pennsylvania.

"The states are beginning to line up," Ozment said. "They want to get us on a schedule."

Ozment said Pennsylvania probably will be in U.S. Foam's future. A Pennsylvania coal mine has been burning about 60 years, he said, and \$70 million has been allocated to extinguish it.

Most burning mines are sealed up and abandoned, he said. Ozment added that the only solution mine experts have found is to excavate the burning mine and then reclaim the area where the burning coal had been located. This method is slow and expensive, Ozment said.

When Ozment founded U.S. Technologies in 1997, the business manufactured foam and sold it for firefighting purposes. With this new opportunity, he said, there will be more opportunities for Longview. Needed personnel, he said, will include engineers, crews to fight mine fires and support personnel. And eventually, he said, the "Hellfighter System" equipment will be built in Longview.

"This will be a huge step for Longview," Ozment said. "It will be a shot in the arm for Longview. There's no doubt in my mind."

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