Mine-safety bill sent for Senate vote

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New legislation sent to the Senate floor would require all mines to have state-of-the-art two-way wireless communications and tracking systems in place within the next three years.

The bipartisan bill introduced by Sens. Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., and Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., Wednesday was unanimously approved by the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, of which Enzi Chairs and Kennedy is the ranking member.

The Mine Improvement and New Emergency Response Act of 2006, created in wake of the 18 miners killed in the Sago and Alma mining tragedies in West Virginia, calls for substantial increases in oxygen supplies for miners, improved emergency responses and enhanced training for rescue teams.

Cosponsors of the bill include Sens. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., and Patty Murray, D-Wash.

"This bill is the product of months of work across party lines to find practical and innovative solutions to enhance mine safety," Enzi has said. "Our goal has been to move the industry to create mine-specific emergency response plans that incorporate safety and technology provisions that will enhance mine safety and better protect workers who put themselves in harm's way to provide our nation's energy."

If signed, this means good news on the technology front for companies

that are further developing wireless technologies that provides real-time monitoring and physical location tracking of miners, which is the push in current mine safety.

Already, state legislators including those from West Virginia and Illinois have incorporated into their mine-safety laws the need for such technology in emergency communication.

Technology-wise, the MINER ACT would direct the secretary of labor to require within three years wireless two-way communications and an electronic tracking system permitting those on the surface to locate persons trapped underground.

It also creates a permanent Office of Mining Safety within the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health to develop new technologies to be used for mine safety and expedite its commercial implementation. This could include the use of refuge chambers for underground coal mines after additional study.

The bill also establishes a competitive grant program administered by NIOSH to provide capital and incentives to private companies to encourage development and manufacture of mine-safety equipment that might be otherwise, according to the bill summary, "economically unwarranted because of limited potential market."

It also streamlines the approval and certification process for new mine-safety technology by providing NIOSH with funding to enter into review and test contracts with third-party laboratories.

Moreover, it requires coal operators to submit detailed emergency-response plans to be continuously reviewed, updated and re-certified by the Mining Safety and Health Administration every six months as well as help mining businesses maintain the use of technology that is currently

commercially available.

But the bill also instructs a NIOSH-chaired interagency working group to provide information on non-classified technology for safety and accident management.

"The MINER Act represents the most groundbreaking development in mine safety legislation in a generation," Rockefeller said. "This bill will usher in a new era of safety for our mines. For the first time, we will be better able to address an accident before it occurs, not simply react to it. And when accidents happen -- and, unfortunately, they will because coal mining is dangerous -- we will now be able to employ the most advanced technology to bring miners back to safety and to their families."