

MEDIA STATEMENT

MINERALS COUNCIL SOUTH AFRICA AND ITS MEMBERS HOST A DAY OF LEARNING ON FALLS OF GROUND TO ELIMINATE A MAJOR SOURCE OF MINING FATALITIES

Johannesburg, 31 March. Plans to combat falls of ground (FOG) in underground mines were under intense focus at an event hosted by the Minerals Council South Africa and its members on 31 March 2022 to share their learnings to eliminate the risks from these incidents which are a historically leading source of mining industry fatalities.

The number of FOG fatalities has fallen to an average 24 a year in the 2016-2020 five-year period from an average of 111 a year in 2001-2005, a 78% improvement. The key interventions were the implementation of entry examinations and actively making working areas safe daily from 2009. In 2012, netting and bolting of tunnel roofs and walls were introduced.

From 2016 there were annual initiatives to address rock bursts and gravity-induced falls of ground. Technology has proved successful in significantly reducing human exposure to rock bursts, cutting rock-burst related fatalities to three in 2021 from 48 in 2003. Gravity-induced rockfalls remain an area of concern and are a key focus of work for the mining industry.

“We’ve made the first desired step in arresting falls of ground incidents. Our day of learning is not only about sharing learnings from fatal incidents, but from the successes of our colleagues and to explore further enhancements to make another major step change towards eliminating FOG fatalities,” says Sizwe Phakathi, head of safety at the Minerals Council.

The Minerals Council’s CEO Zero Harm Forum has agreed a six-pillar FOG Action Plan in conjunction with professional mining organisations for its members to implement to address these incidents. The action plan is a holistic approach that encompasses technical and human elements supported by the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE), the Mine Health and Safety Council (MHSC), organised labour and suppliers.

The Action Plan, approved in July 2021, includes a financial investment of R46 million over five years.



“Falls of ground remain the highest risk of all underground mines and thus the management thereof remains critical. We have seen significant improvement with regards to safety with the introduction of in-stope bolting, netting and world-class safe declaration processes which flowed out of the initiatives we have developed,” says JJ Joubert, president of the Association of Mine Managers of South Africa (AMMSA).

“However, injuries are still occurring and for that reason our efforts cannot stop here. As AMMSA, we will continue to support all initiatives which aim at sharing learning and knowledge to further improve our ability to manage the hanging wall. A day of learning thus forms an integral part of this process. We need to continue to offer the industry opportunities to share learnings and further explore future enhancements,” he says.

In the first quarter of 2022, there has been one fatality caused by a FOG incident compared to six in the same period last year, and seven and nine in the two preceding years respectively.

“If we keep up the trend we’ve seen so far in the first quarter of this year, we will see a significant decline in FOG fatalities this year. Every day you blast you have a brand new underground mining environment so we need tasks and programmes to deal with that,” says Japie Fullard, deputy chairman of the Minerals Council CEO Zero Harm Forum.

“The most important safety intervention we have is to give true empowerment to our employees to stop working in an unsafe environment without fear of victimisation or the threat of disciplinary measures or dismissal. It’s a silver bullet we must use,” he says.

After two successive years of regression in the safety performance of the mining industry, the Minerals Council held a special board meeting at the end of 2021 that outlined eight interventions to halt and reverse the trend. Included in the measures were interventions specifically focused on falls of ground. The industry recorded 74 fatalities in 2021, up from 60 the year before and an all-time low of 51 in 2019.

“We’re proud of South Africa Colliery Managers’ Association (SACMA) taking part in the FOG Day of Learning. As industry we need to be diligent in sharing best practises, new technology and learning from incidents, this is one of the critical ways to ensure all miners return home to their loved ones unharmed at the end of each day. I am excited about sharing the FOG Action Plan with all our members to implement,” says Nozipho Dlamini, president of SACMA

In 2021, the Minerals Council’s CEO Zero Harm Forum mandated the Rock Engineering Technical Committee (RETC) of the Minerals Council, with the support of the South African National Institute of Rock Engineering (SANIRE), to develop the Action Plan to eliminate FOG fatalities.

The Minerals Council will implement the FOG Action Plan project in partnership with mining professional associations including AMMSA, South African Collieries Managers (SACMA), South African National Institute of Rock Engineering (SANIRE), organised labour, regulator, suppliers, research institutions and universities.

The FOG Action Plan consists of the following six pillars: Adoption of leading practices, research and development, skills development, policy issues, achieving zero harm production, and the implementation and monitoring of leading practices.

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