





**Dave states what he believes should be said in public – his reason was to ensure change for the better and to promote institutional learning from mistakes**

## **Dave Feickert: Mine safety policy failed us**

Published in the NZ Herald

By Dave Feickert

5:30 AM Tuesday Jul 12, 2011

The Pike River tragedy has called into question mine safety in New Zealand. Photo / Mark Mitchell

Yesterday, the Pike River royal commission started its main hearing sequence.

It is likely to be a sobering experience for New Zealanders as the information stream begins, first on the background regulatory issues and later on the rescue strategy and the causes of the first explosion at the Pike River mine. We are a small country and the shock of losing 29 of our sons has been severe indeed. The men at Pike River came from all over the country and were welcomed into the tight-knit West Coast community of mining folk.

As a fellow mining consultant, a former British mines inspector told me after he heard of the explosion, "It is always worse when it happens in your own country". Bob Stevenson was Principal Inspector of Mines in the UK and now works as a mining consultant in high-risk countries, Russia and Turkey especially.

I work in China and my colleagues there, in the State Administration of Work Safety which is responsible for safety and health regulation in the thousands of coal mines, among other industries, expressed their profound sympathy.

They have suffered from too many mine explosions, and were incredulous that it could have happened to us. "We are a developing country, with some backward small and large older mines," they told me, "but you are a developed country. We have even been to New Zealand for safety training."

China now has a whole group of modern mines with state-of-the-art technology and excellent safety systems in place that Pike River did not have.

The industry has a very large number of gassy mines, with high methane emissions as the mining process moves forward. Most of the larger of these mines drain the methane and use it in methane engines to produce electricity or heat for the mine or to sell on to the national electricity grid.

Usually these projects are funded under the UN Clean Development Mechanism, which encourages reduction in carbon equivalent emissions (methane has 20 times the global warming effect of carbon dioxide) and win carbon credits. Western "green" banks are making a fortune in China investing in these projects.

In New Zealand, we don't seem to know what to do with our methane, whether it comes from cows or from our mines.

Why successive governments have not brought dairy-waste-to-methane conversion technology, using similar technology to Chinese coal mines, into the carbon credit system is impossible to fathom. Maybe it is because we have become so famous at leaving all these decisions to the market. Well, leaving the development of solar water heating to the market has been an almost total failure in our country,

whereas China's managed market has seen this technology spread like wildfire across city and country rooftops alike in just six years. China is now exporting this to Germany.

The tragedy at Pike River will come to be seen as another market failure, I believe. The professional mines inspectorate and the regulatory system that we inherited from the UK, along with Australia, was abolished in the 1990s, along with the worker safety inspectors, elected by the men from among experienced miners. The industry was moved to self-regulation.

Pike River represents a spectacular failure of self-regulating companies in a high-risk industry. Why we allowed an economic theory of business competition to persuade us that competing companies would co-operate on mine safety is something else I will never fathom.

The tragic fact is that the small band of companies involved in mining did not co-operate to replace abolished regulations with voluntary codes of practice.

Why we ever expected they would beats me. And the Department of Labour's chiefs stood aloof, as the business theory said they should, saying officially, we do not give advice. They merely set the regulatory framework, which was as flimsy as a peony flower in a howling southerly.

At Pike River, the management and men were on their own. When 31 men were caught in that terrible blast, only two managed to escape.

They were near the single usable exit the mine had, and one of these heroes dragged his mate to safety. It is time we dragged our country into the 21st century and caught up with best practice in China, let alone Queensland; for there are other folk to save, and not just in mining.

\* Dave Feickert is a mine safety adviser to the Chinese Government and coal industry and is currently in Beijing.

By Dave Feickert

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## Comments by readers

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### 1. [mchaggis](#) (Hibiscus Coast)

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09:06 AM Tuesday, 12 Jul 2011

Very good post, highlighting some very likely failures in our third world mining industry, in comparison to other countries.

If safety was compromised, it would have been in the name of money, to save a dollar or two. In my opinion, in mining and other dangerous industries, it's a company's responsibility to make sure the health and safety of the workers involved is paramount above all else.

If the company concerned is not prepared to take safety measures seriously, then it has to be closed down, by force if necessary. In a first world country, there's neither a place nor a reason in any industry where the health and safety of employees should be threatened.

I wish the Pike River families and colleagues well and hope they will be able to eventually find

some peace of mind and closure from the Commission of Inquiry's investigation into the tragedy. It's the very least they deserve.

Hopefully from this dreadful tragedy, some positive action will evolve, giving a wake up call to all industries to drastically improve the safety conditions for its workers, so as to avoid another tragic event as that of Pike River Coal Mine.

2 likes

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**Juice** (New Zealand)

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09:06 AM Tuesday, 12 Jul 2011

Excellent and informative column. NZ has a certain arrogance when it comes to bringing in overseas experts and ideas when we think we know better. Didn't Bill English recently reduce the number of mine inspectors in the budget? In so many areas of the NZ construction/mining industry its all about cost and how cheap can it be done, as opposed to making a quality product—see leaky buildings. NZ needs to raise its game and standards across all areas.

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**Jack** (New Zealand)

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09:06 AM Tuesday, 12 Jul 2011

A very forthright article that many in this country will not want to accept. Clearly our simplistic political mantra that the market knows best and that market failure does not exist is a dangerous myth, with negative social and economic consequences.

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**Ned** (New Zealand)

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09:52 AM Tuesday, 12 Jul 2011

If safety is left to business it will be bottom-line driven. Every safety recommendation will be undertaken to its lowest possible extent as this will be cheapest.

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**Chris** (New Zealand)

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09:52 AM Tuesday, 12 Jul 2011

We don't know what caused the explosion at Pike so we don't know whether a different regulatory regime would have made any difference. Let the Commission do its job and stop speculating – Mr Feickert sitting in Beijing should wait with the rest of us for the outcome of the Inquiry.

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**Ethan** (New Zealand)

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09:52 AM Tuesday, 12 Jul 2011

Oh surprise surprise, NZ caught cutting corners? for a few extra bucks we compromised safety. Well nothing new there except we wouldnt have found out unless so many died. Sad.

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**Erhufan** (New Zealand)













Dave could turn his hand to poetry - but still with a health and safety theme.

## ***On vacation in Patea***

We waited, my brother and I

Expecting anytime his head

To pop out from the boiler's mouth.

We had headed South

To this huge factory shed

Lying the length of the sky

In Patea.

Our father, the Inspector,

Clad in his boiler suit

Had clambered inside,

His face with quiet pride

In a job; for him, it was beaut

To protect the industrial worker

In Patea.

A light tapping we heard

From deep within.

The huge monster, silent;

The manager, confident

The machine could soon begin

To roar again with dread

In Patea.

On vacation from school

We learned to respect

The lessons of safety.

His authority was mainly

In experience, checked

In the light of the law

In Patea.

Out came his head, dirt

Around his cheeks and sweat

On his brow. Crawling

Onto the floor, standing,

He said calmly, in neat

Phrases, short and curt

In Patea,

"Corrosion, there is

On some of those tubes.

Repair them please!"

For, if we are to ease

Away from the safety blues

Clear action is *all our biz*

In Patea.

18 February 2007

Dave's end comment to the poem: "The best safety training I ever had was when, as a kid, our father took my brother and I with him on factory visits during the school holidays".



