

For Seventy Years, Fletcher Has Introduced Technology to the Mining Industry Worldwide

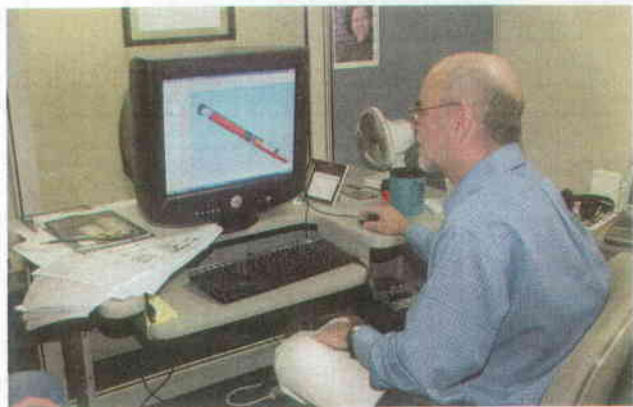
As the coal industry has expanded in recent years, producers' emphasis has necessarily focused on their abilities to expand productivity quickly enough to meet demand, and on compliance with evolving federal and state regulations. They depended on increased equipment capacity to fill stockpiles with easy-to-sell coal. Today, as demand stabilizes and prices ease downward, these companies are finding the need not just to produce higher tonnage, but to do so as efficiently as possible. Ultimately, the answers involve new application of engineering, manufacturing and operating technologies to an unfriendly environment.

J. H. Fletcher & Co. of Huntington, W. Va., has become one of the industry's most successful companies at bringing sophisticated systems into the operator's compartment. Not long ago, Fletcher introduced its "feedback" system into several of its roof bolter models, using computerized sensors while drilling to collect data on roof strata. The information is then used to set optimum drill speed, thrust and torque levels that reduce per-hole drill time and increase bit life. Fletcher is extending that technology today to include roof mapping capability, and machines with on-board parts lists, maintenance manuals and more. That technology is expected to be approved soon for use in underground coal mines.

Fletcher engineers and risk management people have been working overtime to improve bolter ergonomics, which it says will reduce operator fatigue by better matching machine characteristics to the natural shape and movements of the human body. Typically, that involves improved controls, such as joysticks that allow operation of several functions from the same lever, improved visibility, easier entry and exit from the cab and more comfortable seating.

The company has long since earned its reputation as being customer-driven in its approach to innovation. Its engineers frequent their customers' mine sites watching the operators at work and talking with the people who spend the most time in the machines. They are encouraged to gather customer likes, dislikes and ideas on how to make the equipment better. Often, improvements are generated from those conversations.

Fletcher firsts range back to development of the first automated roof bolting machine and introduction of the industry's first rubber-tired underground vehicle. More recently, Fletcher has been responsible for the first dual head roof bolter; the first ATRS (automated temporary roof support) system; the first walk-through machine that prevents operators from having to walk between the bolter and unstable



ribs, and the first remote bolter that allowed the operator to drill and bolt while standing away from the immediate work area. Its product lines also include mobile roof support systems used when extracting coal pillars, scaling vehicles, diesel powered transport vehicles, and a variety of mobile equipment used in the industrial minerals industry.

Two Fletcher hallmarks are the coordination of its engineering, R&D and risk management departments, and its unusual single-crew method of manufacturing. Each breakdown and event is investigated to learn the cause and to identify changes that could prevent such instances in the future. A committee of the departments meets regularly to review ongoing projects and discuss new developments. Field representatives are alert to all customer comments, both pro and con. With every machine, Fletcher people are on-site to train operators and technicians. Customers can receive updated training materials, including interactive audio-visual programs to help with future training. A full complement of manuals, newsletters, safety bulletins and updates is available.

In the plant, each unit is assigned to a selected production crew. That crew remains with the machine from start to finish, and knows every part of it. The crew works as a team, often staying together for years.

J. H. Fletcher & Co. will celebrate its 70th anniversary in 2007. One of the few remaining privately owned companies in the industry, it remains true to its original founder's purpose: to strive to make underground mining as efficient as possible for its customers, and as safe as possible for those who work in the mines.



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