

BRB No. 11-0566 BLA

NORMA L. HAWKINS)
(Widow of JAMES C. HAWKINS, JR.))
)
Claimant-Respondent)
)
v.)
)
W-P COAL COMPANY, OMAR DIVISION)
)
and)
) DATE ISSUED: 04/23/2012
WEST VIRGINIA COAL WORKERS')
PNEUMOCONIOSIS FUND)
)
Employer/Carrier-)
Petitioners)
)
DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF WORKERS')
COMPENSATION PROGRAMS, UNITED)
STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR)
)
Party-in-Interest) DECISION and ORDER

Appeal of the Decision and Order of Richard A. Morgan, Administrative Law Judge, United States Department of Labor.

Tiffany B. Davis (Jackson Kelly PLLC), Morgantown, West Virginia, for employer/carrier.

Rita Roppolo (M. Patricia Smith, Solicitor of Labor; Rae Ellen James, Associate Solicitor; Michael J. Rutledge, Counsel for Administrative Litigation and Legal Advice), Washington, D.C., for the Director, Office of Workers' Compensation Programs, United States Department of Labor.

Before: DOLDER, Chief Administrative Appeals Judge, SMITH and HALL, Administrative Appeals Judges.

PER CURIAM:

Employer/carrier (employer) appeals the Decision and Order (11-BLA-5459) of Administrative Law Judge Richard A. Morgan awarding benefits on a claim filed pursuant to the provisions of the Black Lung Benefits Act, 30 U.S.C. §§901-944 (2006), *amended by* Pub. L. No. 111-148, §1556, 124 Stat. 119 (2010) (to be codified at 30 U.S.C. §§921(c)(4) and 932(l)) (the Act). This case involves a subsequent survivor's claim filed on November 15, 2010.

Claimant¹ filed her initial claim for survivor's benefits on February 4, 2000. Director's Exhibit 2. On August 14, 2000, the district director denied benefits because he found that the evidence did not establish that the miner's death was due to pneumoconiosis pursuant to 20 C.F.R. §718.205(c). *Id.*

On March 23, 2010, amendments to the Act, affecting claims filed after January 1, 2005, were enacted. The amendments, in pertinent part, revive Section 422(l) of the Act, 30 U.S.C. §932(l), which provides that a survivor of a miner who was eligible to receive benefits at the time of his or her death is automatically entitled to survivor's benefits without having to establish that the miner's death was due to pneumoconiosis. 30 U.S.C. §932(l).

Claimant filed a subsequent survivor's claim on November 15, 2010. Director's Exhibit 4. On December 6, 2010, the district director issued a Proposed Decision and Order, wherein she found that claimant was derivatively entitled to benefits pursuant to amended Section 932(l). Director's Exhibit 8. At employer's request, the case was forwarded to the Office of Administrative Law Judges for a formal hearing.

On March 11, 2011, the Director, Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (the Director), filed a motion for a summary decision, asserting that, pursuant to amended Section 932(l), claimant was automatically entitled to benefits as a matter of law, and that there was no genuine issue as to any material fact concerning her entitlement. Employer filed a response in opposition to the Director's motion for a summary decision. In a reply brief, the Director reiterated his contention that claimant was automatically entitled to benefits pursuant to amended Section 932(l).

In a Decision and Order dated May 11, 2011, the administrative law judge found that claimant satisfied the eligibility criteria for automatic entitlement to benefits pursuant to amended Section 932(l). Accordingly, the administrative law judge awarded

¹ Claimant is the surviving spouse of the miner, who died on January 21, 2000. Director's Exhibit 7. At the time of his death, the miner was receiving federal black lung benefits pursuant to an award on his lifetime claim. *See* Director's Exhibit 1.

survivor's benefits, commencing as of September 2000, the month in which claimant's initial survivor's claim was denied.

On appeal, employer challenges the constitutionality of amended Section 932(*l*), and its application to this subsequent survivor's claim. The Director responds in support of the administrative law judge's application of amended Section 932(*l*) to this case. However, the Director contends that the appropriate date for which benefits commence in this case is October 2000, the month after the month in which the denial of the prior survivor's claim became final. In a response brief, employer reiterates its previous contentions. Employer also challenges the administrative law judge's determination regarding the commencement date of benefits, contending that any benefits awarded should not precede the filing date of the subsequent claim.²

The Board's scope of review is defined by statute. The administrative law judge's Decision and Order must be affirmed if it is rational, supported by substantial evidence, and in accordance with applicable law.³ 33 U.S.C. §921(b)(3), as incorporated by 30 U.S.C. §932(a); *O'Keefe v. Smith, Hinchman & Grylls Associates, Inc.*, 380 U.S. 359 (1965).

Employer argues that retroactive application of amended Section 932(*l*) is unconstitutional, as a violation of employer's due process rights and as an unlawful taking of employer's property, in violation of the Fifth Amendment to the United States Constitution. Employer also contends that the operative date for determining eligibility under amended Section 932(*l*) is the date the miner's claim was filed, not the date the survivor's claim was filed. The arguments employer makes are virtually identical to the ones that the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit rejected in *W. Va. CWP Fund v. Stacy*, 671 F.3d 378, 383-89 (4th Cir. 2011), *aff'g Stacy v. Olga Coal Co.*, 24 BLR 1-207 (2010); *see also B&G Constr. Co. v. Director, OWCP [Campbell]*, 662 F.3d 233, 254-63 (3d Cir. 2011). For the reasons set forth in *Stacy*, we reject employer's arguments.

² Employer does not challenge that claimant satisfied her burden to establish each fact necessary to demonstrate her entitlement under amended Section 932(*l*): That she filed her claim after January 1, 2005; that she is an eligible survivor of the miner; that her claim was pending on March 23, 2010; and that the miner was determined to be eligible to receive benefits at the time of his death.

³ The record reflects that the miner's coal mine employment was in West Virginia. Director's Exhibit 1. Accordingly, this case arises within the jurisdiction of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit. *See Shupe v. Director, OWCP*, 12 BLR 1-200, 1-202 (1989) (en banc).

We also reject employer's request that this case be held in abeyance pending resolution of the legal challenges to Public Law No. 111-148. *See Stacy*, 671 F.3d at 383 n.2; *Mathews v. United Pocahontas Coal Co.*, 24 BLR 1-193, 1-201 (2010), *recon. denied*, BRB No. 09-0666 BLA (Apr. 14, 2011) (Order), *appeal docketed*, No. 11-1620 (4th Cir. June 13, 2011) (unpub.).

Employer next contends that claimant is not eligible for derivative survivor's benefits under amended Section 932(l), because her prior claim was finally denied and her subsequent claim is barred pursuant to fundamental principles of res judicata or claim preclusion. We disagree. The Board recently held that the principles of res judicata addressed in 20 C.F.R. §725.309, requiring that a subsequent claim be denied unless a change is established, are not implicated in the context of a subsequent survivor's claim filed within the time limitations set forth under Section 1556, because entitlement thereunder is not tied to relitigation of the prior finding that the miner's death was not due to pneumoconiosis. *Richards v. Union Carbide Corp.*, BRB Nos. 11-0414 BLA & 11-0414 BLA-A, slip op. at 4-6 (Jan. 9, 2012) (en banc) (McGranery, J., concurring and dissenting) (Boggs, J., dissenting), *appeal docketed*, No. 12-1294 (4th Cir. Mar. 8, 2012). The Board, therefore, held that the automatic entitlement provisions of amended Section 932(l) are available to an eligible survivor who files a subsequent claim within the time limitations established in Section 1556. *Id.*

Finally, employer contends that the administrative law judge erred in setting the commencement date for benefits as October 2000, the month of the miner's death. Employer asserts that an award of benefits in this case should commence no earlier than November 2010, the month that claimant filed her subsequent claim. The Director also disagrees with the administrative law judge's commencement of benefits determination, arguing that claimant is entitled to benefits commencing in October 2000, the month after the month in which the denial of the prior claim became final. The Board recently adopted the position taken by the Director, holding that derivative benefits are payable in a subsequent survivor's claim filed within the time limitations set forth in Section 1556 from the month after the month in which the denial of the prior claim became final. *See Richards*, slip op. at 7. As the order denying claimant's prior claim became final in September 2000 at the expiration of the thirtieth day after it was issued by the district director, *see* 20 C.F.R. §725.419(d), claimant's survivor benefits under amended Section 932(l) in her subsequent claim properly commence as of October 2000, the month after the month in which the denial of claimant's prior claim became final.

Accordingly, the administrative law judge's Order awarding benefits is affirmed, as modified to reflect October 2000 as the date from which benefits commence.

SO ORDERED.

NANCY S. DOLDER, Chief
Administrative Appeals Judge

ROY P. SMITH
Administrative Appeals Judge

BETTY JEAN HALL
Administrative Appeals Judge