

# The CORESafety® Interview with Don Gaston

**CORESafety®** is the National Mining Association's (NMA) common safety and health framework that relies on a management system approach to improve safety and health performance at mining operations. The goal of **CORESafety** is to achieve zero fatalities and a 50 percent reduction in the rate of injuries in U.S. mining within five years – 0:50:5.



To learn more  
about the framework, visit  
[www.coresafety.org](http://www.coresafety.org)



**Don Gaston is the president and CEO of the Prairie State Generating Company (PSGC) in Marissa, Illinois. He is responsible for the overall direction and leadership of the Prairie State Energy Campus, and oversees coordination with the Prairie State ownership group, which includes nine non-profit power companies serving 2.5 million member-owners across eight states.**

**In late 2018, PSGC received independent certification for CORESafety, having successfully completed all 20 of its modules. Shortly afterwards, Mr. Gaston conducted the following interview with NMA and discussed the company's experience with CORESafety.**

**NMA: When did Prairie State Generating Company (PSGC) first become aware of CORESafety as a possible safety and health management system?**

**Don Gaston:** Our mine went into commercial operation back in 2012 and immediately became aware of **CORESafety**. The organization was already implementing elements of the system when I came on board in 2014. In 2016, our statistics were not where I wanted them to be. We were in the bottom half nationally with respect to injuries and accidents. Our vision is to be the best mine in the country.

We did a benchmarking exercise to determine the state of the art safety practices in the industry. I realized that **CORESafety** is the gold standard for safety and health of mining operations in the United States. At that point we had a leadership meeting. We decided that as a leadership team we were going to get engaged and implement all 20 modules of **CORESafety** and we were going to do it quickly. So, we set up a process over a three-year period to implement **CORESafety** and we were expecting to achieve some substantial results, like other mines have achieved after going through that process.

**NMA: Did you already have a safety and health management system (SHMS) in place and then integrated CORESafety into that? Or was this your first official SHMS?**

**Don Gaston:** No— we didn't have a safety health management system in place. We had elements such as safety procedures, safety processes, but they were not integrated into a formal SHMS. **CORESafety** did that for us. We implemented the 20 modules of **CORESafety**, adjusting our prior procedures and processes into **CORESafety**.

**NMA: Walk us through that process, Don, from when you first brought CORESafety into the organization all the way through the rollout.**

**Don Gaston:** The first thing we had to do was get our leadership team aligned around the direction. As a leadership team, we looked at various options for safety excellence and we determined that **CORESafety** was the route we were going to go with. The first step was to get our leadership committed and aligned. Then after that, we had to get the workforce bought in and that was a challenging effort. So, we used our pre-shift briefings and we used all-hands meetings to communicate **CORESafety**. We had some of the **CORESafety** videos to use with our workforce so that people under-

stood what the processes were and how to follow along. And then we had a systematic approach of going through each process over a period of several years.

**NMA: Did you take a formalized approach to the kickoff of CORESafety?**

**Don Gaston:** Yes, absolutely. We picked seven modules initially and with “leadership” being the key first module, we focused on that for the first year. Then we focused on eight more modules during the second year and went through the modules systematically. Through that process, we had some audits conducted by outside people who are experts in this area. They critiqued our progress and then we made adjustments along the way.

**NMA: Looking back, was it more challenging to get buy-in for CORESafety at the leadership level or with the day-to-day workforce at PSGC?**

**Don Gaston:** I would say that was equal. I’ve been through a number of safety initiatives personally and I know that both are difficult. The senior person - which in this case was me - has to make the decision that this is the way we’re going. Once I made that decision, I had to make sure that all our leadership was aligned around that direction. Fortunately, we were able to get there quickly.

Once leaders set the standards and expectations, the workforce will usually buy into it. At least a majority will, and that’s what we experienced here. It took several months to get our leadership team engaged and aligned, and once they were bought in, then the standards and expectations were set with the workforce. Over the last couple of years, the workforce has become engaged very well. They’re working as a team and we’ve achieved some remarkable results.

**NMA: What is your opinion about the whole CORESafety implementation process? Is it comprehensive enough? Could it be made better?**

**Don Gaston:** I would say it’s very good. There are some things that maybe I would like to see done a little differently. Maybe a little more employee ownership in some of the modules, but I think for the most part the modules are excellent. They helped us set up our roadmap to implement CORESafety and provided a lot of guidance to our leadership team and to the workforce.

**NMA: Tell us a little more about employee ownership. What would you like to see there?**

**Don Gaston:** I’m comparing CORESafety with the OSHA Voluntary Protection Program (VPP) process. The OSHA VPP process is structured so that employees play a much bigger role in owning the processes. And it leads to maybe a little bit more engagement. And while both CORESafety and VPP have their strengths and weaknesses, I think maybe OSHAVPP is a little bit stronger than CORESafety in that one area.

**NMA: That’s good to know. Thank you for sharing that with us. So, what is the safety culture like now at PSGC versus three years ago? Has there been a tangible change that you can witness and document?**

**Don Gaston:** Yes, and this is the biggest benefit of CORESafety. The change that I’ve seen is the level of trust between team members. It has helped break down barriers between management and labor. They see that we care about their safety and when you establish that trust, then you can more effectively implement the processes.

As we have implemented those processes, our injury and accident rates have gone down dramatically. Our compliance, our production and our costs are all much better today than they were three years ago. I attribute that to the CORESafety approach.

**NMA: Do you have any numbers that you can share with us now?**

**Don Gaston:** In 2017, we had 17 lost time accidents. In 2018, we had four. We’ve had over a 70 percent reduction in that one-year period. Additionally, our all injury rate was 5.55 in 2015, and it was 2.26 by the end of 2018. That’s a remarkable improvement and CORESafety has driven that through the efforts of the leadership team and the employees in implementing these processes.

**NMA: Do you believe that achieving the 0:50:5 objective is a realistic possibility?**

**Don Gaston:** I believe that's very conservative. With what I'm seeing with the **CORE**Safety program and with the experience I've had in power plants with OSHA VPP, I've seen results more like a 90 percent reduction in reportable and lost time injuries. And I fully expect to achieve that here at Prairie State.

**NMA: Now that PSGC has completed CORESafety's 20 modules and you've received independent certification, what happens from here on in 2019?**

**Don Gaston:** This is a process that's going to take a number of years to get to what I consider to be excellent in each of those 20 modules. I'm expecting more positive results from **CORE**Safety and those results are the elimination of injuries eventually, and then substantially improved compliance production and cost reductions.

**NMA: Will you go back through the 20 modules and repeat them all or will you touch on some of them periodically? What's the plan for that?**

**Don Gaston:** We have a "Plan-Do-Check-Act" process, which incorporates feedback systems set up and an annual audit to verify that we're making progress and continue closing gaps. In addition to our internal annual audit every three years, we'll have an outside expert come in and critique us to make sure that we're remaining down the path of continuous improvement. I fully expect to see substantial results each year going forward.

**NMA: What would you recommend for other mining companies that may be considering CORE-Safety?**

**Don Gaston:** I would highly recommend the **CORE**Safety process to any other mining company. At Prairie State, we want to be the best mine and the best coal-fired power plant in the country. If you want to see how it's done right, then come here and look at our operation. An outstanding safety program is the key to getting the workforce aligned, engaged and achieving outstanding results so that you can become best in class.

For any company that wants to be the very best, **CORE**Safety is an excellent first step to get there. I also really appreciate the National Mining Association (NMA) recognizing Prairie State. Our whole team has worked very hard to achieve this certification and we're seeing great results.