

Earthly Considerations

When is the right time to start environmental and social programs for an advanced exploration program?

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With the exception of various advances in technology, the most significant change to exploration in the last 20 years is an increase in environmental and social regulations. Companies must adhere to these regulations before, during, and after their exploration programs in most, if not all, jurisdictions allowing exploration. Many of these requirements are well documented in provincial, territorial, and federal regulations and, in some cases, guidance documents, so it is possible for exploration companies to obtain the necessary permits before the desired start times of their programs. However, with a handful of exceptions around the world, most jurisdictions have few to no regulations about when to start the more advanced environmental and social studies for a given project.

The key is to advance these “other programs” early enough that they do not hold up a project’s progress, but not so early that valuable project dollars are spent on completing environmental programs that may eventually be needed, but not until the project has advanced to a prefeasibility or feasibility stage, which may be many years in the future. This is especially important in the current market. Spending limited resources on environmental programs too early in a project’s evolution precludes spending those resources on additional drill holes or valuable technical studies such as structural evaluations. These programs could make the difference between whether or not a project is advanced from a resource estimate to the engineering studies needed to move it towards production.

SRK prides itself on advising clients, at each stage of a project’s evolution, about the appropriate level of environmental data collection for that stage. It is not necessary to complete a full environmental baseline program for a project during the development of a resource estimate or a Potential Economic Assessment (PEA) and following advice to the contrary will result in unnec-

essary expenditure too early on. Furthermore, one of the key requirements for a project’s future success is to develop a strong relationship with stakeholders as soon as possible in the project’s evolution; this will help build the social license needed for the project to advance to the next stage.

During the early project phases, activities of a technical nature can also be carried out to obtain data that will support both the future mining of an orebody and the environmental data needs. One such activity is coupling hydraulic testing with exploration drill holes at key locations of a deposit. This enables the gathering of hydrogeological, rock mechanics, and resource data in the same program. In addition, depending on the nature of a deposit, early stage environmental geochemistry on core could go a long way towards understanding the deposit’s metal leaching and acid rock drainage potential.

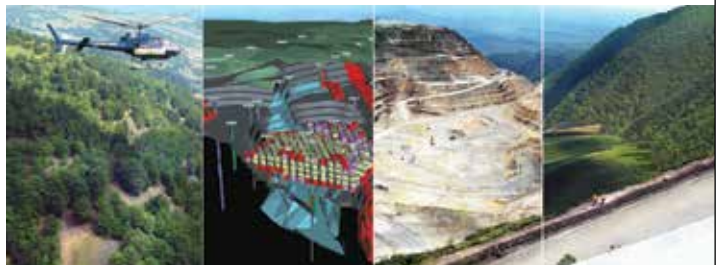
Fundamentally, the key to gathering the correct environmental data for each stage

of a project is to include the right environmental specialist on the project team; one who understands the exploration and engineering phases of an exploration or mining project as well as the regulatory needs of the jurisdiction in which the project is located. Doing so satisfies the geological interpretation, engineering, environmental, and social requirements of a project at the appropriate time which, in turn, allows the limited resources available to be allocated to the activities where they will have the most beneficial impact at the early stages of a project.

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