

Rare-Earth Elements Found in Jamaica's Red Mud

DAVID McFADDEN, Associated Press

KINGSTON, Jamaica (AP) — Jamaica may be able to benefit from newly found deposits of rare-earth elements that are key ingredients for smartphones, computers and numerous other high-tech goods, the Caribbean island's top mining official said Tuesday.

Science, Technology, Energy & Mining Minister Philip Paulwell said Japanese researchers believe they have found "high concentrations of rare-earth elements" in the country's red mud, or bauxite residue.

China is now the world's main supplier of rare-earth elements, which are minerals that play a critical role in making products from basic communication devices to high-tech military weaponry. Worried by that dominance, manufacturers around the globe have been spurring searches for other sources that could be profitably mined.

In a statement to Jamaica's Parliament, Paulwell said researchers from Japan's Nippon Light Metal Co. Ltd. believe rare-earth elements can be efficiently extracted in Jamaica, where a once-flourishing bauxite industry has fallen on hard times.

Paulwell touted the discovery as a potentially significant boon for the Caribbean island's chronically sputtering economy.

"We are at the starting line of an opportunity that has the potential to redefine Jamaica's economic prospects in a positive way," he told lawmakers. "... The government of Jamaica perceives the extraction of the rare-earth elements that are present in Jamaica to be an exciting new opportunity to earn much needed foreign exchange and create jobs."

A pilot program will establish the scope of any potential commercial project on Jamaica, which is about the size of the U.S. state of Connecticut. The environmental and planning agency has already authorized the pilot program but other government agencies still need to examine it.

Nippon Light Metal has agreed to invest \$3 million in buildings and equipment for the pilot project while also being responsible for operating costs. Any rare-earth elements produced during this phase will be jointly owned by Jamaica and the Japanese company. Negotiations for commercialization are expected to occur at a later date.

China has built a virtual monopoly on supplying rare-earth elements to the world's manufacturers, thanks to cheap labor and low environmental standards. It alarmed companies around the world in recent years by reducing exports and at the same time building up its own industries, saying the curbing of rare earth exports was needed for environmental protection.

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Last year, the World Trade Organization created a panel to evaluate China's rare earth exports after the U.S., the European Union and Japan complained about the curtailment of Chinese sales of rare earth minerals.

Rare earths aren't scarce, but few places exist with enough concentrations to mine profitably, and they are difficult to isolate in a purified form and require advanced technology to extract.

Jamaica had previously tried to get rare earth minerals from the country's red mud around bauxite mining grounds, but Paulwell said it faced major challenges in attempting to extract minerals from the bauxite tailings.

Last January, Nippon Light Metal approached Jamaica saying it had the capacity to extract rare-earth elements and wanted to evaluate the local red mud. Since then, it has done chemical research and successfully extracted some rare-earth elements, Paulwell said.

Representatives of the company could not immediately be reached for comment.

If the pilot project is a success, Nippon Light Metal hopes to extract 1,500 metric tons of rare-earth oxides annually, Paulwell said.

"It is clear that this resource presents an opportunity Jamaica must pursue, and which must be managed in such a way that Jamaica and Jamaicans benefit significantly," he said.

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