

Greenland Lifts Ban On Uranium Mining

JAN M. OLSEN, Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Greenland's parliament has agreed to remove a 25-year-old ban on uranium mining, paving the way for an industrial boom that the Arctic island hopes will help it gain independence from former colonial master Denmark. Greenland, a semi-autonomous part of Denmark, wants to step up its mining of rare earths, valuable elements used in the production of smartphones, weapons systems and other modern technologies. But uranium is often found mixed in rare earths, so the ban was blocking key mining activity.

Experts estimate that a mine in southern Greenland could contain the largest rare-earth metals deposit outside China, which currently accounts for more than 90 percent of global production. An Australian company has estimated it could extract up to 40,000 tons of rare earth metals per year. In a 15-14 vote with two absentees, the parliament backed late Thursday the center-left governing coalition's desire to remove the ban. The government also gave a British company a license to extract iron. The company, London Mining, is now seeking investments to develop a mine northeast of Nuuk, the capital, and is expected to bring in foreign workers, possibly from China.

Many Greenlanders want to use the island's mineral resources as a way to reduce dependency on a subsidy from Denmark which now accounts for about two-thirds of the island's economy. Denmark is open to allowing Greenland greater independence, but there is currently no way the island can support its costs without the subsidy. Denmark's foreign trade minister, Nick Haekkerup, sought to ease concerns that Greenland might sell the uranium it finds in the rare earths mining. He said Friday that the country cannot decide that alone because Denmark still handles its security and foreign policy.

Jens-Erik Kirkegaard, Greenland's minister for natural resources, said after Thursday's vote that several laws now need to be changed before exports of rare earths can start "in a couple of years or more." The government wants to introduce royalties on the mining industry and revise a law that would allow an influx of foreign labor.

Environmental activists lamented the parliament's narrow vote in favor of lifting the ban on uranium extraction. "It can have great consequences for the environment and the people of Greenland," said Greenpeace spokesman Jon Burgwald in

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

Copenhagen , "So we suggest that specific maximum limits on how much radiation, wastewater discharge, etc. are decided."

Source URL (retrieved on 01/29/2015 - 9:51am):

http://www.chem.info/news/2013/10/greenland-lifts-ban-uranium-mining?qt-recent_content=0