

# Namibia ready to fuse uranium with critical minerals

Namibia is set to gain from the global nuclear power revival but the benefits could extend far beyond the country's uranium sector.

The Southern African country has long been renowned as one of the world's premier uranium jurisdictions. The industry dates back to Rio Tinto Ltd's opening of the Rössing mine near the port of Walvis Bay in 1976. In the last great uranium boom of 2006-2011, Rössing was joined by Langer Heinrich (Paladin Energy Ltd), Trejkoppie (Areva, now Orano Group) and Husab (China General Nuclear Power Group). While only Husab survived the subsequent fall, the recent price rise has seen Langer Heinrich relaunched and several other development projects given the green light.

Namibia's ability to react to uranium's changing fortunes is a key advantage for the country, according to several Australian executives managing projects in the country.

"Namibia has a uranium economy which is a good basis to build on," Deep Yellow Ltd managing director John Borshoff – who has worked in the country for more than 30 years – told **Paydirt**. "The rest of the world has been denuded of uranium expertise but there are still two large operating mines in Namibia, and a lot of people have gone through those mines, giving them deep experience in uranium that we can tap into."

Elevate Uranium Ltd managing director Murray Hill pointed to the country's active sector as an advantage for Namibian projects over assets in other countries.

"It is a lot better jurisdiction – and I shouldn't say that too strongly because we are in Australia as well – but the sovereign

risk for uranium in Namibia is a lot less than in Australia, I wouldn't necessarily say that about other commodities, but for uranium it is," he said.

"You've had Rössing operating for all those years, then you had three mines developed in a relatively short space of time and now we have seen three mining licences [Deep Yellow, Bannerman Resources Ltd and Forsys Metals Corp] issued. That demonstrates the willingness to approve mines and the ability for companies to invest there."

Bannerman chief executive Gavin Chamberlain said despite the 12-month process, the issuing of a mining licence for the company's Etango project was both predictable and transparent.

"The Namibian Government is definitely very supportive of the industry," he said. "There was a wait for the approval but they said it would take approximately 12 months and that is basically what it took. They have come to the party."

The Namibian Government is now hoping to use its uranium experience, and the reputation it has built with international investors, as a platform for its wider resources ambitions.

Last year, the Government sent a large delegation to **Paydirt's** Africa Down Under conference with the distinct objective of attracting Australian explorers and miners.

Speaking to **Paydirt** at Mining Indaba in Cape Town last month, Namibian Investment Promotion & Development Board (NIPDB) executive director François van Schalkwyk said his group had been tasked with attracting further investment.

"The first step has been to visit mining in-

vestment markets and promote our country," van Schalkwyk said. "We are speaking to juniors in Australia and elsewhere, but we think we can do more, we would like to see more Australian companies come to Namibia."

"We believe the drive to develop more investor-friendly policies will aid us in attracting more investment. We are working on a number of tax reforms to attract companies and develop infrastructure and natural resource products. We are looking to use those regulatory tools to attract companies – tax dispensation, ease of doing business, etc. to create wealth."

Namibia has developed a reputation as one of Africa's most stable nations and van Schalkwyk said the Government was conscious of the advantage this gave it when speaking with international investors.

"We have strict rules and enforce them, but they are predictable," he said. "If you look at countries we compete with for investment, there is often not so much stability, we don't want to give up our advantages."

"The moment you begin to overregulate, investment can leave. The Government takes good care to manage the regulatory environment so it remains balanced."

Given vast swathes of the country's host rocks are masked by transported cover, Namibia does not have the volume of walk-up targets other African countries enjoy but van Schalkwyk said explorers would benefit from high-quality pre-competitive data.

"Many investors think it is not possible to find anything, but Namibia is very underexplored and there are many opportunities," he said. "The Ministry has a modern system

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The iconic Rössing uranium mine, in operation since 1976, is the foundational asset of the modern Namibian mining industry



and is digitising it, especially geological data. We aim to have the leading geological survey on the continent.”

Several ASX-listed companies are already enjoying the opportunity. Copper explorer Noronex Ltd has been encouraged by early-stage exploration results on its Kalahari copper belt tenements on the Botswanan border while Wia Gold Ltd has swiftly defined a 1.3 moz @ 1 g/t gold resource at its Kokoseb discovery in the north of the country.

Away from the ASX, mid-tier gold miner B2Gold Inc appears set to reverse its decision to close the Otjikoto mine following the discovery of a new high-grade zone on the property.

“We’re doing a \$C9 million exploration programme this year with the intention to add an underground mine to the low-grade stockpiles,” B2Gold chief executive Clive Johnston said at Mining Indaba. “That means the mine does not stop in 2025, far from it. If successful, we expect to get a boost of 120,000 ozpa from 2026 to 2031.”

While uranium, gold and diamonds are the foundations of its sector, like every country, Namibia views critical minerals as the springboard to further development.

“The vast majority of exploration licence applications in the last year have been for critical minerals,” van Schalkwyk said.

Critical minerals policy is a crucial topic in African mining circles as governments strive to define their opportunities in the face of a wave of international interest in the continent’s reserves. Like several neighbours, Namibia has declared a desire to avoid the dig-and-ship model of previous mineral

booms in favour of building its own processing and refining capabilities. Last year, the Government announced a ban on the export of unprocessed critical minerals, including lithium, cobalt, manganese, graphite and rare earths. Such policies have been questioned by miners concerned with African countries’ ability to support downstream processing, but van Schalkwyk said the policy would not restrict large-scale miners in the country.

“The Government has started regulating the export of ore and that has kicked off a number of companies committing to doing that, but it is about producing a concentrate in-country instead of exporting ore,” he said. “We see it as a first step, and recognise more work needs to be done. We believe the drive to more investor-friendly policies will aid that, they will reward companies that begin processing locally.”

ASX-listed Lepidico Ltd is the most advanced lithium player in the country. The company hosted multiple state-owned enterprises and multinational corporations at its Karibib lithium project in January and February as it closes in on strategic investment.

Lepidico has priced Karibib at \$266 million to build a mine and processing plant capable of producing a lithium concentrate from lithium mica.

Lepidico managing director Joe Walsh told **Paydirt** Karibib was benefitting from Namibia’s progressive approach to critical minerals development.

The export ban is on unprocessed materials that includes ore as a direct shipping product,” he said. “It is required that ore be beneficiated into a higher value product,

such as a concentrate, for export. Lepidico’s development at Karibib is based on using convention flotation to beneficiate the ore from 0.43% Li<sub>2</sub>O to 2.5-3.5% Li<sub>2</sub>O.

“There is potential for enormous growth over the coming decades from direct foreign investment in these areas, which was part of the rationale for the establishment of the NIPDB. And successful development in such areas should lead to further investment in downstream manufacturing, which is also a Government ambition. But it starts with the raw materials and having an established mining law and resources industry is definitely helpful.

Lepidico’s rapid progress demonstrates Australian mining’s continued success in the country. Van Schalkwyk said the Government hoped the relationship would continue.

“If you survey the global mining industry, Australian companies are renowned for being responsible, good actors,” he said. “They have a good track record on people, environment and governance. We want good faith operators and believe Australia is a place where companies operate to a strict regulatory framework.”

For the Australian companies, the advantages of Namibian investment are proven.

“We have seen uranium mines developed and new projects licenced,” Hill said. “That shows a supportive government and then you are blessed by infrastructure, the port at Walvis Bay which Zambian copper miners are now using, the desalination plant and readily available power. It is a great place to operate.”