

AUSTRIA

*By Dr Siegfried Polegeg
Fren-Exploration and Mining Co.*

Austria is facing an accelerated decline of its mining industry. Almost all of the traditional mines have closed down, and the only remaining operations are those extracting scheelite at Mittersill, graphite at Kaisersberg, lignite at Bärnbach, siderite at Eisenerz, gypsum and anhydrite at Kuchl, Grundlsee, Tragöß and leucophyllite in Aspang, talc at Feistritz and kaolin at Schwertberg. There are also magnesite operations at Breitenau and Radenthein, these being the only remaining magnesite mines still in operation in Austria.

Recycling as a source of secondary raw material is growing. Within the past ten years the consideration of environmental protection has encouraged the use of organic waste in combustion plants.

The last lignite open-pit mine, at Bärnbach, is expected to close down before exhausting its reserves because of the low prices paid by the nearby power station (Voitsberg) for the mine's low calorific value lignite. All other lignite mines in Austria were closed down within the past decade.

It is also a question of a comparatively short time before the famous iron-ore mine at Eisenerz closes. The mine is only surviving because of financial support from the government but, as a member of the EU,

Austria is obliged to consider the EU regulations limiting such subsidies. This, and the mine's low grade iron ore, may cause its closure.

The scheelite mine at Mittersill, which is owned by Germany's Metallgesellschaft, is the only hope for continued metallic mining in Austria.

Most of Austria's gypsum is produced by open-pit operations, and most of the gypsum produced is utilised for gypsum panels, for which there is still a growing market, and one can assume that the lifetime of those mines will last until the considerable reserves are exhausted.

Some four years ago, two magnesite companies, Veitscher and Radex, consolidated to form Veitsch-Radex Corp. The company subsequently developed an interesting product from serpentine-rock. A rock powder, dissolved by hydrochloric acid, yielded a silica gel residue. This product contains acid-resistant minerals such as chromites, olivine and bronzite. The fine-grained bulk is then purified by Fren's dry gravity separation-techniques to remove heavy minerals. This upgraded silica gel is mainly used as an absorbant in washing agents and in the food industry.