

Uran plays the patient game

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Assuring locals that uranium mining would pose no threat to their villages and towns is one difficult task that faces Kate Hobbs, managing director of Australia-based mining firm Uran.

Last year, the Ministry of the Environment (MŽP) turned down Uran's request for an exploration license. Hobbs said she is prepared to make a long-running series of repeat visits to the Czech Republic as the company lobbies for its fresh application to be accepted by officials and citizens.

Q: Why are you revisiting the possibility of mining, given that the MŽP has already turned down the possibility?

A: The original applications were lodged through our geological consultancy Timex Zdice because Uran didn't have the necessary authorization to apply itself at that time. Now we have the proper authorization, so we can re-apply in the name of Uran itself. We lodged new applications two weeks ago at the MŽP in Brno [South Moravia] for three areas in Věžnice, Polná and Jamné, near Jihlava [South Moravia]. The towns that are affected are all in that area around Polná and Přebyslav.

We have also got a reaction from the people in the affected towns. They say that they need more information on what we plan to do. Since the refusal we have spent a lot of time talking to the people. It is an ongoing thing. I and other directors are going there continuously. My colleagues were there in November.

Q: What are the most common concerns, and what do you tell people to convince them of your case?

A: In the past they wanted to know more about the possible mining methods. This is difficult [to respond to] because we are only applying for an exploration permit, not a mining permit. Until you have an exploration permit and complete your studies, it is really difficult to say precisely what mining you will carry out. Sometimes if you are trying to forecast what you might do and then your ideas change, people will say, 'So, you lied to us before.' So we produced a video showing them schematically how we might carry out the mining. And it's different to previous mining in the Czech Republic. On the issues that were raised before, the major ones were about the transport from the mine to processing. Because they want to know how many trucks will be on the roads and how the rock containing the uranium will be transported. We told them that there will be no open trucks. We would reduce the volume of the trucks to 12 or 15 or 20 as a maximum per day and put the ore into sealed containers on trucks. That means that there is no dust that can come off. In the past, the rock was dumped on the ground, so there was a potential risk of contamination.

Q: Are there other common concerns?

A: Another question is about ground water, [concerning assurances that] its quality will not be damaged. That is something that can be dealt with, but I can't tell how until we do exploration that includes an environmentally based study. Another big question people felt in the past is that because it was a top secret state issue, there was no consultation. So people would like a lot more opportunity to be consulted if the mining is to happen, where the facilities are, where the entry would be, where the crushing plant would be. ... We would like to be underground because then there would be no noise, no dust.

Another issue is the social pattern of the towns. In the past, people were brought in from the outside who didn't fit in well with the society of the village. We would just employ local people and pay them well.

Q: What are you going to offer people in the location next to well paid jobs? Some direct money?

A: Absolutely. We would make some contributions to [local government] councils. The law does call for certain payments during exploration, but they are extremely small. We have now prepared a legal contract that includes terms I talked about to mayors last year and we are just now sending them out. We are proposing to pay these towns a flat amount of \$50,000 (Kč 867,200/€ 34,000) per year every year there is an exploration permit. Elsewhere, where we work, we normally make contributions to children's and adult sports, cultural events and contributions to roads. And then—if we succeed and can start mining—we have suggested that we would contribute about \$100,000 per year of mining, for each leased mining area.

Q: You said that there will be no effect on ordinary people, but what about landscape aesthetics? Wouldn't they be affected even during exploration?

A: I don't think that there is any medium in exploration that has long-term effects on the landscape. Digging trenches to explore is not something we do, although it has been done in the past in the Czech Republic. All we do is drilling and when we finish with a drilled hole we dig down half a meter below ground and put a concrete plug into the hole. Then we bury it up to the surface level with soil and replant the grass. Normally we drill a line of drill holes in one place, one hundred meters apart from each other. This takes about two weeks. When we finish, there is nothing to see.

Q: What method are you going to use?

A: The only two ways you could mine in Brzkov [between Polná and Přebyslav] are both forms of underground mining. One way is through the shaft, something that you used to see in the Czech Republic, for example in Dolní Rožinka (the only currently functioning Czech uranium mine). You can see this shaft with the great head frame from everywhere and also it is very slow, which means it is more difficult to do mechanized mining. And then there is another method that we would use. You have a spiral decline, where you drive in. There is no shaft, it is like a tunnel which goes down into the ground. The trucks drive into the tunnel, which goes underground in a spiral. They drive down to the source where they are loaded. All you see on the surface is an entrance in the hillside—5 by 5 meters. With this method, which is faster, you can bring up more ore every day. So the mine can be closed down sooner. I'd hate to say how long the life of the mine would be, because it would be a guess, but it would be something like 10 years.

Q: Are you interested in some other locations apart from around Přebyslav?

A: Yes. We have lodged some applications in the area of Stráž pod Ralskem [North Bohemia]. We would look into underground mining rather than chemical mining. We were just talking to Diamo [the state company for mining and processing uranium based in Stráž pod Ralskem] this morning about it. We talk regularly to [Marian] Böhm [the company's deputy director for production] on possible exploration. Actually Diamo wrote a letter supporting our exploration in Brzkov, saying it was a good thing. I think Diamo would be very interested in carrying out exploration and mining in that area themselves. We respect that. But I don't think from the beginning they have been in any doubt about us coming here and we want to work with Diamo, not against it

Q: What are you going to do with the uranium, use it here or export it?

A: I think there is a huge opportunity for the Czech Republic here because of your position in Europe and because you were one of the world's biggest uranium producers in the past. To secure supplies of clean energy for other parts of Europe would be of great interest to us, to not only cooperate with Diamo, but also with [the dominant Czech electricity provider] ČEZ. We haven't talked to them yet, but I would be very interested to do so. All over Europe people are becoming really conscious of energy self-sufficiency. And to me, the Czech Republic has a huge strategic opportunity not only to secure its own energy supply but to continue in selling energy to the rest of Europe.

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