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Emerging phosphate miner gains momentum, aims to 'change' mining perception

Emerging miner Kropz is working to change the perception of mining and become the new industry benchmark through the responsible operation and rehabilitation of the Elandsfontein phosphate mine, near Saldanha Bay.

The R1.35-billion Western Cape-based mine, a 70:30 joint venture between Kropz and African Rainbow Capital, anticipates plant commissioning and steady-state production by the first quarter of 2017, after mining development started in August.

An envisaged second phase will eventually see the establishment of a fertiliser plant in Saldanha, at a cost of R10-billion, Kropz technical director **Michelle Lawrence** told media on Friday.

Kropz is the majority shareholder, major funder and debt provider for the 1.5-million-ton-a-year, 15-year Elandsfontein phosphate project, which will see phosphate concentrate shipped from the Port of Saldanha Bay for the export and domestic markets.

Several key environmental decisions have been taken since the conceptual design to "change the perception of mining", she said, including the method of roll-over strip mining of 50 m sections at a time, which reduces the size of the open excavation area, limits dust creation and mitigates the mining footprint.

This will allow the continuous rehabilitation of each area, with first rehabilitation expected to start in the third year of operation or at steady-state production, with the belief that the mine will be a "real success story" environmentally prevailing.

"As soon as a 50 m strip is completed, overburden removed from the new strip is placed back into a previously mined strip, including the careful replacement of the vegetative top layer of soil. This process allows the land to recover during operations over the course of the project, with seedlings establishing five months after placement," the company highlighted.

While the Elandsfontein property spans 5 000 ha of agricultural land adjacent to South African National Parks' land on the West Coast, the Dunefield Heritage Site and 15 km from the Langebaan Lagoon, the operational area, including the excavation area, the plant and the office, will be limited to a fenced off area of 500 ha, with the open area of the mine excavation limited to 60 ha at any given point.

The group was awarded a prospecting right in 2013 and a mining right in 2015, with Kropz intending to export to South America, India and Australia and reduce South Africa's reliance on fertiliser imports.

In February last year, the environmental management plan was approved, after more than 32 specialist studies had been undertaken at a cost of R25-million.

A full-time archaeology and palaeontology team has been appointed as part of the company's heritage management plan, which was approved in January, to protect the Elandsfontein Fossil Beds that occupy a portion of the mine's property.

Further, Kropz applied a game management programme, in partnership with the University of Pretoria, which comprises six monthly game counts and the construction of an access road along the fence line.

Meanwhile, in conjunction with the University of Cape Town, it has conducted the "search and rescue" of sensitive vegetation and species of conservation concern. This was undertaken alongside the construction of the mine access road along existing firebreaks, the start of civil construction, the completion of site earthworks, and the completion of the power lines and substation.

In February and March this year, the company applied for a integrated water-use and an atmospheric emissions licence respectively, both of which are still outstanding but at an advanced stage.

Water lines will be laid to connect the operation to the Saldanha Bay local municipality's water supply, while careful mine dewatering and the replacement of groundwater to protect aquifers and the Langebaan Lagoon are being undertaken.

The company will ensure that fresh groundwater flowing towards the nearby lagoon remained unaffected, while a comprehensive groundwater monitoring system has been put in place for continuous surveillance, said Lawrence.

Meanwhile, Kropz aims to maximise the benefits for the Saldanha Bay municipality, particularly the Hopefield region.

To date, around R107.5-million had been spent in the region.

Over 1 000 people had been employed for the construction phase of the project, while more than 450 people – 70% local – will be employed during the course of the mining operations.

In addition, Kropz plans to channel its social commitments through its Greenheart Foundation.

The foundation has donated in excess of R1-million to upgrade the Hopefield Thusong Centre and has budgeted R35-million for a drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre in the Saldanha Bay municipality.

In addition, Kropz aims to develop a tourism and conservation hub at the end of the life of the mine by 2032, leaving behind a fossil museum converted from the run-of-mine stockpile tunnel, a future tourism hub out of the mine's office, a "well-considered" mine entrance for school tours and groups and a mining and sustainability knowledge centre.