

Vorster recharged for new adventure

Experienced project developer Alwyn Vorster had no desire to chase another executive role until the opportunity to lead Australia's likely next rare earths producer came knocking.

The former Iron Ore Holdings and BCI Minerals Ltd boss was headhunted by Singapore-based Hastings Technology Metals Ltd chairman Charles Lew to guide the company through the upcoming construction of the Yangibana rare earths project near Carnarvon and the accompanying hydrometallurgical plant in Onslow.

Vorster, who also recently joined the board of emerging junior ChemX Materials Ltd in a non-executive capacity, said Lew's offer was too good to refuse.

"I made it clear when I exited BCI that any role I would take in the future must be focused on the modern minerals, whether it's in the industrial space like high-purity alumina, or rare earths or lithium, nickel, etc...so it was quite an easy decision for me to take on another CEO role," Vorster told **Paydirt**.

"I was attracted to the role because of Charles Lew's vision to create what we're calling Hastings 1.0, which is to develop the Yangibana project, and then Hastings 2.0, which is our mine-to-magnet strategy where we aim to be the first company globally with an integrated supply chain from rare earths into magnets. That vision was very interesting to me and I really wanted to be a part of it."

Vorster is the company's first-ever chief executive and was mandated by the Hastings board to review the current project business case and contracting strategy, including a re-estimate of the expected capital costs for Yangibana.

A price tag of \$682 million (including contingency) was attached to the project when Hastings last updated its feasibility estimates a little more than 12 months ago. With inflation curtailing the development or expansion of several other resources projects in Western Australia in the last year, Vorster said it was incumbent on the company to provide greater clarity around the capex requirements.

"The latest capex numbers were published in February 2022, which means the market sounding was done in 2021, but we all know the world has changed in the 18 months since then and it is quite clear there will be changes to our capex and so on," he said.

"We have committed to setting the clear new estimates to the market in this first quarter. We need to get our house in order before we go out and raise additional funding."

Some of that clarity was confirmed last month when Hastings released a revised ore reserve of 20.93mt at 0.9% TREO (up 25%



Hastings has begun early site works at the Yangibana rare earths project



Alwyn Vorster

on the previous estimate published back in July 2021) for Yangibana, underpinning a new mine life of at least 17 years.

Hastings is partially funded for main construction works, having recently secured an increased loan of \$220 million from the Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility and boasting a healthy cash position of \$172 million at the end of the December quarter.

Some \$70 million has been spent on early works at the project such as the accommodation village, site access roads, air strip and telecommunications infrastructure.

Vorster has also beefed up the Hastings management team ahead of main construction, with Rudolph van Niekerk appointed chief operating officer and former politician Vince Catania accepting the role of general manager, communities and government relations.

Other key appointments include Tim Gilbert (general manager, operations), Robert Klug (general counsel) and Freya Hunt-Davies (manager, cost control).

While this is Vorster's first major foray into

rare earths, he insists the challenges at Yangibana are no different to any of the other projects he has worked on in the past two decades.

"There is nothing I see in this project development phase that is significantly different from the experience I had at Hope Downs, or on the Buckland project that MinRes [Mineral Resources Ltd] is now developing, or the Mardie salt project," he said. "It is the stock-standard approvals, influencing schedule as a critical path, the funding pressures, getting the construction and the contracting model right.

"In this case, many decisions were made on the contracting model years and years ago, then COVID hit, there were delays, it wasn't necessarily implemented, so we need to tidy up our EPCM contracting arrangement with DRA [Global Ltd] and reconsider more fixed price contracts to control cost and reduce risk in the next three years and so on."

Unlike some of the projects he has previously worked on, Vorster won't have to search too hard for additional customers for the mixed rare earths concentrate to be produced from Yangibana.

Hastings already has offtake agreements in place with ThyssenKrupp, Solvay and Schaeffler, with further deals expected to be signed before anticipated production in early 2025.

"I've worked on projects in iron ore, mineral sands, salt and potash across my mining career and you always had to work extremely hard to attract the attention of potential offtakers," Vorster said.

"If I talked to the rare earth experts 2-4 years ago, you couldn't find the offtakers. Now they are approaching us, perhaps not as strongly and assertively as they might be in the lithium space, but the world has certainly changed and they are knocking on our door instead of the other way around."

— Michael Washbourne