

Bibiani's revitalisation gaining traction

It's no secret that West Africa seems the place to be, particularly when it comes to Australian gold explorers.

For Noble Mineral Resources Ltd, high grades and enormous exploration potential at its 2 million ounce Bibiani gold project in Ghana have drawn comparisons with Western Australia's own golden age of mining.

Noble acquired Bibiani last year, and is already looking to bring it into production in the second half of 2011, with a ramp up to (plus) 150,000 oz by 2012.

According to the company's managing director, Wayne Norris, the current drilling work was seeing the pits get bigger and bigger.

"We've got a \$30 million program of exploration on drill and assaying over the next two years and, at the moment, we've got three rigs on site working 24/7, and we've purchased two more," he said.

"The key development activity is getting the mine models wrapped around the small satellite pits. It's not greenfields, but infill drilling ... we know the gold's there, but it's just a matter of drilling – it just keeps getting bigger and bigger.

"In the next quarter, we'll have some resource upgrades on the site, and that will give us immediate production for the mill."



Bibiani.



The face of Ghana is a friendly one when it comes to mining.

Located 250 kilometres north west of Accra on the Sefwi-Bibiani Belt – itself host to 17 million oz of gold – output will initially be built around the historic Bibiani mine, which has been commercially operating on and off since 1902.

Early production will come from the satellite pits at Walsh, Strauss, Ahemen, Grasshopper and Russell. Extensions are being targeted through the current work program – and they are also key to unlocking the area's geology, according to Noble's investor relations manager Peter Cash.

"We think that when we look at the satellite pits, we may be seeing proof of a parallel structure, which really gets us excited as it may indicate a repeat of Bibiani, which has already produced 4 million oz," he said.

"There's no resource on any of the satellite pits, so the resource that we put out initially will come from the Aheman pit while we frantically drill out the rest of the satellite pits.

"We're going to be looking at over 200,000 oz by the time we drill them out, and we think they will provide us with

mill feed for up to three years while we drill out the Bibiani main pit in parallel.

"To the south is the Chirano mine – it has a series of pits which stop near our border, and we're thinking this is linked to the mineralisation on our tenements."

The real gift for Noble is the lack of assessment done in the area, with previous owners AngloGold Ashanti Ltd and Central African Gold Ltd focusing more on production and less on exploration for much of the mine's history.

"Previously, they mined on grade control rather than geology or structure, which shows you why all this could be missed – they weren't looking for it," Cash said.

"The geophysics and soil sampling just says there are obvious structures and, if we can repeat this or extend it, the potential for us to find another 2-3 million oz in the next few years is our target.

"We think we can get 5 million oz all up in resource in the next 2-3 years."

Although untapped potential was a known West African signature, Norris said he had seen early on that comparisons to Australia's goldfields were apt.

"I said before I went over to look at Bibiani initially that it's Kalgoorlie 100 years ago," he recalled.

"We've had brokers who've done their field trips twice now and they've been overwhelmed by the opportunities there.

"Our aim is 150,000 oz in the 2012 calendar year, and then we'll increase it.

"The feed grades will be 1.5-2.5 g/t, so it's considerably higher than the average in Australia. But then everything's relative to West Africa – it's double or treble the reserve."

Caroline Smith