

Python power

WHAT happens when a gekko is crossed with a python? Answer: a processing system that could cut costs by more than 30%.

Called the Python Underground Processing System, the Gekko Systems technology is a mixture of a crusher, a grinding mill, a concentrator and a flotation circuit. The system gets set up underground. Instead of hauling ore to the surface for treatment it is instead turned to a concentrate that can be pumped, trucked or hoisted above ground.

Python is the fruit of three years' work and \$1.6 million worth of government funding. Gekko had to match the federal money dollar for dollar to qualify for the grant.

So far the system has been tested at several mines but only on the surface.

Gekko managing director Elizabeth Lewis-Gray said the company was in negotiations with a miner to install the first working Python system underground. She would not name the potential customer because Gekko has only received a letter of intent and not a formal order at this stage.

However, both Gekko and its potential customer are confident that the system will lead to a 30%-plus reduction in costs.

Those savings come not only from reduced fuel and other transport costs but also from reduced staff below ground.

Gekko is understood to be in discussions with several other miners about the technology.

"The ones we're targeting are the ones where we're reaching anywhere from 92 percent to 96 percent recovery," Lewis-Gray said.

"Those are the ore bodies that tend to liberate at a relatively coarser size."

The Python setup can be used for recovering both free gold and sulphide gold.

At that rate of recovery, there would need to be far less trucking of ore to the surface for treatment. Essentially the mine is only carrying between 10% and 30% of the volume of the ore it has mined to the surface.


Lewis-Gray said some of the mines showing interest were greenfields operations that did not have any processing infrastructure in place as yet.

This could prove a boon to them because it potentially means a much lower capital expenditure and shorter time lag to get their gold projects into operation. In the on-surface trials Gekko carried out, it was able to move its plant into position and commission it within a week.

Pumping the concentrate to surface is one option Gekko has been looking at. However, Lewis-Gray said for some operations using trucks or even hoists could be a better option.

"It's quite possible that some of the deeper mines in South Africa, for example, may want to use their existing hoist facilities rather than putting in pumping stations," she said.

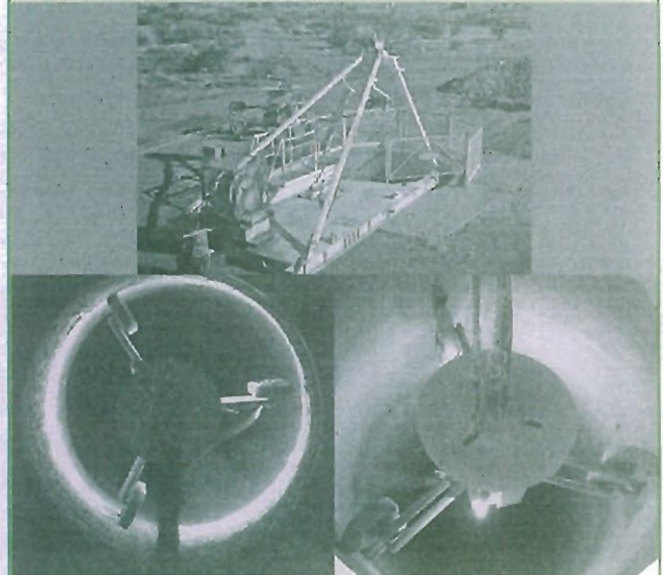
Many South African mines have invested large amounts of capital in the development of their shaft hoisting systems. Management of these operations would not be too keen to have that expensive infrastructure lying idle.

Part of the reason for this large upfront investment is the comparatively predictable nature of many South African orebodies. 



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