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"Refinery@ mine would be 'huge' by
Cam Farden

Teck Cominco Ltd. has applied to the provincial Environmental Assessment Office to develop a refinery at Highland Valley Copper. While the company is not expected to complete a feasibility study until the end of the year, mine president Wolf Nickel said Monday it opted to file early due to the complex nature of the environmental approval process.

"It's a huge complex. It's not something you put in the back parking lot. It would be one of North America's largest facilities of its kind."

Because the technology is new, Teck Cominco doesn't want environmental approvals to stall construction if the project is determined to be economically feasible.

"If it needs to be rescinded we can do that later," Nickel said, calling it "early days" for the refinery study.

Teck Cominco's B.C. technology group developed a method to refine copper using a hydro metallurgical process as an alternative to conventional smelting. The corporation, along with international consulting firm AMEC, is working on a feasibility study to build a plant at the mine west of Logan Lake.

Highland Valley Copper currently ships copper ore to smelters in Asia for processing.

In tandem with the feasibility study, engineers at Highland Valley are doing more detailed work on the mine plan in an attempt to stretch at least four years beyond 2013, when it is otherwise expected to exhaust reserves.

Copper prices, which have settled back from recent records, are helping the business case to mine lower-grade deposits. Those same prices, along with rapidly rising costs to haul ore to the Coast, in addition to shipping costs overseas, bolster the case for the refinery.

The idea was first considered in the late 1990s, but shelved because of high capital costs.

Nickel said the project is exciting because it means ore mined in B.C. could be processed here, helping move the province away from the maligned "hewers of wood and drawers of water" reputation as a raw commodity exporter.

The corporation is expected to promote energy-saving and reduction in greenhouse gases from reduced truck, train and ship transportation as environmental pluses of the project.

As many as 150 jobs are contemplated at the refinery, which would produce 132,000 tonnes of pure copper.

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MINING

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Time for the mining industry to clean up its act

By suzuki david