

ENERGY & MINING

# Bentonite prospects brighten in state

**By TOM MAST**  
*Star-Tribune staff writer*

CASPER — Because bentonite has successfully carved out new markets, the near-term outlook for the expandable clay mineral is positive, according to the Wyoming State Geological Survey.

Bentonite long has been associated with the oil industry. It is used in "drilling mud" that lubricates and cools drill bits, and carries rock fragments out of drill holes.

In 1981, at the height of an oil exploration boom, state bentonite production peaked at 4.8 million short tons. With the subsequent bust, bentonite production declined, dropping to less than 2 million short tons in 1986.

Since 1986, the fortunes of bentonite have turned up again. The geological survey expects production to reach 2.75 million short tons in 1994, the highest level in a decade. Either this year or next, production may even exceed 3 million short tons, Ray Harris, industrial minerals and uranium section chief, said.

Harris said the main factor is probably an increase in bentonite use for environmental containment. Bentonite is used as a barrier to the migration of fluids in such settings as landfills, waste treatment sites and equipment maintenance yards.

It is also used as a binder in foundry castings and for kitty litter.

In September, The Bentonite Corporation announced it was re-opening an idle plant near Lovell. A second plant at Lucerne in Hot Springs County also plans to re-open.

Richard Brown, vice president of Wyo-Ben, Inc. in Greybull, said he was "guardedly optimistic" about the prospects for bentonite over the next few years.

He added, however, that the outlook is contingent upon several factors, including changes that might occur in federal mining laws, the amount of oil and gas drilling, and general economic trends.

Historically, Brown said bentonite has been a "commodity-type" industry. Now, companies are increasingly interested in specialty markets. "We're not so much finding new markets as developing them," he noted.

Brown expects Wyo-Ben's production will be increasing, although he "wouldn't even want to speculate on how much." He also sees a slight increase in total state production next year.

Wyoming bentonite production began in 1921, when a single operator produced 162 short tons. Production first hit 1 million short tons in 1952, according to state data sources.

State mine inspector records show that in 1993, American Colloid mining operations produced 1.38 million short tons of bentonite, the most of any company in the state.

Geologically, Harris described bentonite as "an altered volcanic ash." The ash fell into shallow seas during the Cretaceous period.

The source of the ashfall apparently was near what today is northern Wyoming. The biggest bentonite deposits are found in a band that stretches roughly from the Black Hills through the Big Horn Basin, Harris said.

Source: Wyoming State Geological Survey

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