

PLAY FOR CLAY

As segments of larger economy show signs of life, bentonite production booms



Geologist Gretchen Hurley with the Bureau of Land Management walks through a bentonite bed east of Greybull. Applications to the BLM to mine bentonite are increasing.

Versatile substance is used in variety of products, fuels jobs in Bighorn Basin area

Stories and photos
By MARTIN KIDSTON
mkidston@billingsgazette.com

GREYBULL, Wyo. — Applications to mine “the clay of 1,000 uses” are pouring in to the Bureau of Land Management as companies look to capitalize on the bentonite boom and keep pace with the nation’s rebounding economy.

From mines at Framme to Bearcreek, companies have ramped up production, racing to extract a commodity that was deposited millions of years ago as volcanic ash and chemically reworked in a shallow, inland sea way.

At McIsaac’s mine east of Greybull, BLM geologist Gretchen Hurley holds a lump of bentonite in her hand. With the consistency of Play-Doh, the damp product is easily shaped, rolled and squeezed.

“I think the new applications are a result of companies trying to get ahead of the permitting curve, because it takes a while to permit one of these mines,” Hurley said. “If we can get them approved for a 500-acre



Bentonite, known as the ‘clay of 1,000 uses,’ comes in a variety of qualities, each suited for a different use. It’s pliable and can absorb 10 times its weight in water.

mine, that’ll keep them supplied in bentonite for 10 to 30 years.”

Bentonite has the ability to swell to 10 times its original size and absorb 10 times its weight in water. It’s used in cat litter and beauty supplies and as a binding agent in animal feed. It’s also used in foundry work and in drilling, including in the Bakken field of North Dakota.

The clay’s industrial uses tie it directly to the nation’s energy and auto

Seeding experiments improve reclamation efforts by industry

LOVELL, Wyo. — It’s another hot, dry day on the state line, and the ground crunches underfoot. The desert plants are sparse, and what little grows does so in rows and bunches.

Two years ago, skidders rumbled over this ground, removing bentonite clay from a pit 20 feet deep. But the skidders have moved on and the desert plants are now closing in, sinking thirsty roots into a careful blend of topsoil and overburden.

While the bentonite industry has mineral rights to the valuable clay within its mining claims, it also has an obligation to reclaim the land once the mining is finished.

Promised by bonds and measured by the watchful eye of state and federal government, reclamation includes backfilling the open pits, contouring the ground and reseeding vegetation to match the surrounding landscape.

“If a seeding doesn’t take in two or three years, we’ll ask for a ‘seeding,’” said Gretchen Hurley with the Bureau of Land Management. “We hold the bond

Please see Bentonite, A6

Please see Reclamation, A6

Bentonite Production Spurs Wyoming Economy

Clipped By:



seabix1
Thu, Apr 23, 2020