

The new challenge to Jadar in Serbia is emerging in the wake of Rio Tinto's promise to improve its cultural heritage policies globally and to ensure against the destruction of heritage sites of exceptional archaeological and cultural significance.

A petition calling for a ban on Rio Tinto's Jadar lithium mine project and associated metal processing complex in the Jadar Valley because of pollution concerns has garnered more than 110,400 signatures in Serbia by June 10. The four-month-old petition drive, which is backed by a coalition of 19 NGOs, hit the 100,000-signature threshold June 9.

Lithium Jadar project is designed to produce 55,000 mt/year of battery grade lithium carbonate — for which global demand is growing in the electric vehicles and electronics sectors — as well as 160,000 mt/year of boric acid (B₂O₃ units) and 255,000 mt/year of sodium sulfate.

Referendum ahead

The Serbian government is prepared to hold a referendum to find out the will of citizens, Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vucic, said while expressing his support for the project in a press conference June 4. In December, Rio Tinto said when completed Jadar was expected to become the country's second largest exporter. A feasibility study is expected to be complete at the end of 2021, and if approved, construction would commence in early 2022 and take up to four years.

"This year we are implementing a land acquisition program, which is a prerequisite for a construction permit," Vesna Prodanovic, general manager of Rio Sava Exploration, said in March.

But not everyone is convinced about the project's merits.

"I appeal to people not to sell their land and to think about the consequences. This part of Jadar and Radjevina has been inhabited for more than 8,000 years, and no one will force us out," said Marija Alimpic, an activist with the Protect Jadar and Radjevina NGO, told Serbia's TV Nova S on June 6.

Feasibility study

Prodanovic said that Rio Tinto still does not have an exploitation license, adding that the project is in the feasibility study stage.

"We can't commence any works prior to the approval of the environmental impact study (EIS), a process that will last this entire year," Prodanovic stated in an interview April 22. The company is confident about the EIS process and expects to address all environmental concerns in the study that will be submitted to the Serbian government for approval.

Rio Sava Exploration, Rio Tinto's Serbian subsidiary, was not immediately available for

comment June 10. Rio Tinto's exploration license reached the end of its life cycle in February 2020. Subsequently, the company applied for a retention license under Serbian regulations with the new permit covering an area of 66.8 square km (25.8 square miles), approved by the government in February 2020. It is valid until September 2021.

Role of public opinion

The commitment for greater sensitivity was made in the aftermath of Rio Tinto's apology to the Puutu Kuntj Kurrama and Pinikura people (PKKP) in Western Australia, in which the company admitted that the destruction of 46,000-year-old Aboriginal Juukan rock shelters "was wrong."

The destruction of the two Aboriginal caves in Pilbara caused a public relations debacle that resulted in the ouster of Rio Tinto's then-CEO, Jean-Sebastien Jacques, in late 2020.

Mining in sensitive locations is becoming fraught with additional risk of regulatory clampdown. Rio Tinto experienced this recently after the U.S. Agriculture Department withdrew approval for the proposed Resolution Copper mine in Arizona after a public outcry that ensued following events in Australia.

Resolution Copper, 26 years in the making, was expected to have relatively little surface disruption as it is not a surface pit mine, but an underground mine like the proposed Jadar project.

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