

Significantly more efficient copper extraction with hydrogen peroxide

- Environmentally friendly Evonik technology could increase yields by ten percent
- Corroborated in Australian copper and gold mines
- Low investment costs for mining companies

The use of hydrogen peroxide can solve an old mining problem while significantly increasing the amount of copper extracted from the ore. Certain impurities such as iron sulfides (which include pyrite) have been difficult to remove until now. A new technology based on hydrogen peroxide now offers a solution. Using a small copper and gold mine in Australia as an example, Evonik developers have demonstrated that the technology works on an industrial scale and can increase the copper yield by roughly ten percent.

“Up to now, mine operators have primarily been familiar with hydrogen peroxide as a wastewater treatment agent. Now we’re showing them that this material can also make metal extraction itself notably more efficient,” says Dr. Ingo Hamann, who heads Production & Engineering within the Active Oxygen Business Line. As Hamann goes on to say, “Our process adds significant value for the mine operator—and it does that with very little investment and in an environmentally friendly way.”

When extracting base metals like copper, the mining industry generally uses what is known as the flotation process, in which the ore is first mixed with water and then finely ground. Adding various chemicals and aerating the mixture causes ore particles to float to the surface along with the foam generated; the particles can then be skimmed off. This process raises the copper content by ten to 15 percent over the original concentration in the ore (0.5 to 2.5 percent in the ore compared to 15 to 30 percent in the concentrate).

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Contact person Economic Press
Dr. Edda Schulze
Corporate Press
Phone +49 201 177-2555
Fax +49 201 177-3030
edda.schulze@evonik.com

Contact person Specialized Press
Dr. Karin Assmann
Innovation Networks &
Communication
Phone +49 6181 59-12230
Fax +49 6181 59-712230
karin.assmann@evonik.com

Evonik Industries AG
Rellinghauser Straße 1-11
45128 Essen
Germany
Phone +49 201 177-01
Telefax +49 201 177-3475
www.evonik.de

Supervisory Board
Dr. Werner Müller, Chairman
Executive Board
Dr. Klaus Engel, Chairman
Christian Kullmann
Thomas Wessel
Patrik Wohlhauser
Ute Wolf

Registered office Essen
Registered court
Essen local court
Commercial registry B 19474
VAT ID no. DE 811160003

Hydrogen peroxide is effective when added at a specific concentration and at a specific point in the process. A very small amount of this highly effective oxidant is all that is required to increase the yield by approximately another ten percent and to reduce the problematic pyrite content in the concentrate. Critical steps in the development process were determining the appropriate process window and adapting the process to various ore compositions.

Company information

Evonik, the creative industrial group from Germany, is one of the world leaders in specialty chemicals. Profitable growth and a sustained increase in the value of the company form the heart of Evonik's corporate strategy. Its activities focus on the key megatrends health, nutrition, resource efficiency and globalization. Evonik benefits specifically from its innovative prowess and integrated technology platforms.

Evonik is active in over 100 countries around the world. In fiscal 2014 more than 33,000 employees generated sales of around €12.9 billion and an operating profit (adjusted EBITDA) of about €1.9 billion.

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