



DOING THE RIGHT THING

by
Dr. Terry Mudder

The mining industry has never been one to rally around itself or sharply criticize those companies or operations which have created environmental incidents and caused environmental damage through a lack of best management practices. This resistance to criticize or work collectively has allowed the opponents of mining to stir emotions amongst the public and feed their fears on a worldwide basis. No aspect of mining exemplifies this mix of issues and concerns better than the production of gold and the use of cyanide. Fears related to the use of cyanide have a historical origin in judicial executions, mass suicides, tainted pharmaceuticals, and of course the Holocaust. These fears surrounding cyanide were justified and ignited an environmental movement that focused on banning the use of this chemical and the gold mining industry dependent upon it. Then early in the year 2000, a terrible but avoidable incident occurred in Northern Romania near its border with Hungary and the Ukraine. A small gold mining company without proper environmental management and operational controls experienced an incident the consequences of which reverberated around the globe.

The outcry led to a symposium sponsored by the United Nations Environmental Program and the former International Council on Metals and the Environment now known as ICMM. The global symposium brought together leading scientists, engineers, and policy makers from industry, government, and the NGO community to discuss the possibility of creating a unified international management protocol for the use of cyanide in the gold mining industry.

Many including this author thought it would not come to pass. Yet in spite of serious differences of opinion, agendas, and biases, the International Cyanide Management Institute was formed and came into reality in 2003 with publication of a set of Principles and Standards of Practice that formed the basis of a voluntary Cyanide Code for the gold mining industry. Scores of dedicated individuals and entities participated and persisted and in the end accomplished something that had never been done before by bringing the gold mining industry together with a common cause and for the greater good of those potentially affected by its operations using cyanide.

Very few environmental incidents have actually occurred in the gold mining industry over the past half century and no major ones have occurred since 2002. Dozens of cyanide producers and transporters along with gold mining companies and operations have become signatories to the Code. Scores of their combined operations have already or will soon become certified under this Code. More than half of the world gold production will come from certified operations. Many millions of dollars have been spent upgrading and improving the safety of mining operations with respect to cyanide use. And yet to date, little if any recognition of this unique accomplishment has been heard from the NGOs or the public in general. No entity has indicated cyanide can be used safely if the mining operation adheres to the Code. No government or its agencies have sanctioned the Code or made it mandatory. In fact, the author knows of no professional organization that has endorsed it and supports its application on an industry wide basis. And the attacks continue stressing that gold mining remains dangerous citing the 2000 Romanian incident at Baia Mare as the norm. It may be possible the attacks on gold mining are not about cyanide.

Ironically, many mining companies and operations have decided not to sign up to the Code. Although there are legitimate reasons for taking time to attain certification, there does not seem to be a reason for ultimately abandoning the Code, while stating adherence to sound cyanide management practice.

Those mining companies and operations which do not adhere to the Code and suffer an environmental incident should be held accountable and publicized that they do not represent those in the industry who voluntarily spent time and money to become certified. There is no excuse to ignore the inevitable. At some point principle must be put above profit and this author has made a commitment to focus on aiding those companies and operations which have become signatories to the Code. The others are on their own to deal with the consequences of their decisions and actions. Application of Best Management Practices means just that.

In particular a debt of gratitude must be paid to the personnel at these operations who have embraced and championed the process and dealt with gap analyses and audits to become certified under the Code. It is an honorable achievement and one worthy of admiration. In spite of what others think or may not think the gold industry although it was generally safe is now even safer and the risks of a major environmental incident amongst the certified operations have been reduced dramatically. If the Code is rigorously adhered to, arguments against gold mining in general based on the perceived environmental dangers of cyanide use are no longer valid.

It is hoped the development and implementation of the Code will lead the industry to address other issues such as tailings dam designs and water management in the same systematic and collective fashion.

Not every facet of mining can lend itself to this type of comprehensive international best management practice approach, but it is clearly a major step and the industry should be applauded for it. And in spite of all of the reasons to the contrary, sometimes we should just do the right thing.

Dr. Terry Mudder
TIMES Limited
Sheridan, Wyoming
cyunara@aol.com