

Gold mining could resume in Jamaica soon

The country's only ever gold mine which shut down nearly two years ago could be back in operation this year.

Operations at a gold mine in Pennants, Clarendon, which ceased nearly two years ago, could resume soon, according to the National Environment and Planning Agency (NEPA).

Chief Executive Officer of NEPA, Peter Knight, said the agency was advised that the operators, AUSJAM Limited, "wished to return to re-activate the site" – the first and only such facility to be operated in Jamaica.

This is based on reports of additional gold deposits in the area.

Commissioner of the Mines and Geology Division, Ministry of Energy and Mining, Clinton Thompson, said based on knowledge of the area's geology, "there are some more deposits on the site which require further exploration."

"That was why closure of the mine was not affected. When the mine (was being) operated, gold was less than US\$300 per ounce; it's now US\$1,500. You can recognise the importance of that deposit, which is the patrimony of the Jamaican people," Thompson said.

Labour and Social Security Minister, and Member of Parliament for North Central Clarendon, where Pennants is located, Parnell Charles, said he had met with representatives of AUSJAM Limited last year and they assured him they would be back in operation this year.

The Minister added, however, that out of an abundance of caution, he asked the Ministry of Energy and Mining to give consideration to "taking over" the mining operations.

"Between 20 and 30 persons used to get employment from this little operation. We understand we still have small reserves that could be explored, and we could continue mining. We want to carry on the mining," Charles said.

Regarding the revocation notice issued in 2010, Knight informed that NEPA encountered challenges finding AUSJAM's principals who had reportedly relocated the firm to Australia, subsequent to ceasing mining operations.

The CEO said, however, that the principals have since been located, and are currently in the island for discussions with the local authorities regarding their input in addressing the matter. There is also the issue of toxic contamination surfacing last week, linked to over seven tonnes of sodium cyanide which were being stored at the site.

NEPA had determined that the site of the leak posed no immediate threat to human health.

A highly toxic chemical, sodium cyanide, is reportedly used extensively in mining operations globally. It is believed to have been used in the gold mining activities at Pennants. Housing, Environment and Water Minister Dr. Horace Chang assured that steps have been taken to safeguard the citizens' welfare, but said that if the situation changes and gold mining poses a threat, the environmental permit would be revoked.