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Stillwater Mine moon-like material attracts NASA, USGS

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As a load of rocks tumble out of the bed of a dump truck it appears to be a typical day at the Stillwater Mine.

But if you take a closer look bright orange buckets are scattered around. And for a geologist, it's like a kid in a candy store.

"It's a very unusual deposit," explains U.S. Geological Survey Research Chemist Stephen Wilson. "The only types that are typically found are here in Stillwater and in South Africa."

Normally the rock is hauled to the surface, then dropped off at the dump. But who would've thought the material found deep underground could have a connection to the moon?

"What we have to do is determine if the waste pile, as a general source, is going to be suitable for what they want," explains Wilson.

"They" translates into NASA. And they have some major interest in the moon-like material found in the mine's dump.

"Our current plan was to return to the moon by the year 2020," says NASA project manager Mark Hyatt. "That means that we need to have the materials necessary, including simulants, to begin our development and testing efforts as early as ten years prior."

NASA will start preparing for their journey to the moon next year, but the USGS has been researching at Stillwater Mine since 2007.

"Our first visit here we looked at the dump as a source material and we found that it was ok but it wasn't great," Wilson admits. "There's a service road above the mine, where there are a number of outcrops up there. And those tend to be very high quality rocks for what we want."

USGS has come up with three versions of simulant that can be used for different experiments. The highest quality rocks will be used for health studies, while the lowest quality, found at the dump, will be used for excavating. The 100 tons of simulant NASA will be needing for their development and testing will be costly, but Wilson says the grade options will help in that area.

"By having those different grades, you're more efficient, cost wise, in what you make," says Wilson.

The relationship between Stillwater Mine, USGS, and NASA appears to be flawless. Stillwater receives help clearing out their dump and the other two parties get the material they need for a space excursion.

But that's not all, if research shows NASA can use the mine's moon-like rock, Stillwater could be

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compensated.

"It will be determining, you know, is there a worth for this material that would require compensation back to Stillwater," explains Hyatt.

For now, the focus lies on finding the right combination of minerals and rock at Stillwater Mine that will help the next mission to the moon.

"We couldn't find this any other place in this country," states Wilson.

NASA's goal is to establish a permanent facility on the moon's North or South Pole by 2024 where astronauts will live and work.



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