

Illegal mining threat to lawful operations, safety and the environment



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16th August 2013

Illegal mining operations threaten the livelihood of legal operations, compromise the safety not only of the illegal operation's workers but also the environment and threaten the surrounding communities and, therefore, have to be stopped, says Aggregate and Sand Producers Association of Southern Africa (Aspasa) director **Nico Pienaar**.

Legitimate mining companies have to comply with health, safety and environmental legislation to ensure that workers are not exposed to dangerous working conditions, while illegal mining operations have little, if any, regard for these regulations, he says.

"By cutting corners, avoiding statutory costs and abusing people and the environment, illegal miners can gain a substantial cost advantage, which impacts on the profitability of legitimate mines and at worst can force legal operations to close down," Pienaar adds.

In light of this problem, the Department of Mineral Resources (DMR) established an illegal mining committee, comprising regulatory authorities, industry role-payers and unions.

This team managed to crack down on a vast illegal mining operation in Roodepoort, on the West Rand, last month.

The land had previously been used as a gold processing plant for Durban Roodepoort Deep Mine and was left in an unrehabilitated state, with small deposits of gold still available on site. Illegal miners had moved in and built specially made processing tables to wash out the gold. The processed gold was being sold to illicit buyers.

"Illegal mining in South Africa is a growing problem. However, often after arrests have been made, the prosecuting authority seemingly does not regard the offence as being serious enough to have the offenders prosecuted – they are released on bail and return to their illegal mining operation," Pienaar says.

He adds that the South African Police Service is working on this problem and DMR officials are committed to, and are aware of the value of, protecting the industry.

"Aspasa has raised the issue of illegal mining in the aggregate and sand industry for many years and has played an active role since the committee has been established."

He adds that the committee's next focus will be on illegal sand, gravel and aggregate mining in the wider Gauteng region.

"Awareness has to be raised within the mining industry to report suspected illegal mining operations, irrespective of which commodity is being stolen or how small the operation may seem," Pienaar concludes.

Edited by: Martin Zhuwakinyu