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Q&A with SRK Industry's next big test



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The tailings storage facility at Anglo American Platinum's Maresburg mine in South Africa. SRK CONSULTING



Tailings storage at the Jerritt Canyon gold mine in northeast Nevada. SRK CONSULTING

“As mines grow larger and more complex, the systems we create – tailings dams, pipelines – demand deeper understanding and better governance.”

– TERRY BRAUN, PRESIDENT OF SRK NORTHAMERICA AND DIRECTOR OF THE TAILINGS CENTER

BY NORTHERN MINER STAFF

Mining's next frontier isn't underground – it's in how the industry manages the waste it leaves behind. As investors demand cleaner balance sheets and communities push for stronger safeguards, tailings and water management have become the new measure of credibility and value.

Across the sector, the focus is shifting from compliance to proof of sustainability—showing not only that risks are controlled, but that resources like water are protected for the next generation.

To explore how miners can meet this challenge and build lasting trust, *The Northern Miner's* Devan Murugan speaks with Terry Braun, President of SRK North America and Director of The Tailings Center.

Devan Murugan: Terry, thanks for talking to us.

Terry Braun: Pleasure to be here.

DM: What's really at stake for miners today when it comes to water and why has it become such a defining issue?

TB: Devan, we all know that water is essential. Communities – and we as human beings – rely on it for drinking, for irrigation and even for its spiritual importance. Water also sustains ecosystems, which depend on its availability.

We know there are times of abundance and times of scarcity. And minerals are found where they're found, so when there's an opportunity to responsibly develop an ore body, one of the first technical and economic questions we must ask is: Is there water available, and is it reliable?

Mining inevitably moves water, whether we're dewatering open pits or underground workings, processing ore, or using water to transport materials. Each step affects the overall water balance, sometimes leading to losses through entrainment or increased evaporation.

So, the real question becomes: How do we balance the needs of communities and ecosystems with the demands of mining? That's the conversation at the forefront of our industry right now.

DM: You've said there's still no consistent framework for disclosing how mines manage water. In simple terms, what does water stewardship actually mean on the ground?

TB: If we look back about 20 years, around 2005 to 2007, we began to see movement toward water stewardship as a tangible goal, not just a philosophy. It became about disclosure, transparency, and understanding the trade-offs in developing water resources.

This wasn't unique to mining. The United Nations introduced the CEO Water Mandate, and in Australia, we saw the first water accounting frameworks – structured ways to quantify inputs, use and discharge.

Ten years ago, the Global Reporting Initiative expanded its climate-focused work to include water. Since then, we've seen sustainable accounting standards emerge, requiring companies to report water use and impacts.

In just the last few years, new frameworks – like the Climate Disclosure Board's water reporting guideline and the International Council on Mining and Metals' standards – have tried to align these methods. We're seeing convergence, but not all companies follow or disclose under the same frameworks.

And the biggest gap? The level of disclosure. Many report at regional or national scales, but real transparency comes at the site level. We've come a long way, but there's still work to do.

DM: In places like Ecuador, we've seen projects stall because of community fears over water security. How can mines engage earlier and co-design solutions to build trust?

TB: It really ties back to that first point, water availability is strategic. Mining inevitably affects water resources, so companies must

assess both the physical capacity of a basin and the significance of those resources, not just their volume, but their reliability and cultural value.

Where we often fall short is in data. We can monitor groundwater, stream flows, and water quality, but it takes time to understand natural variability between wet and dry periods. That uncertainty makes early engagement essential.

Companies need to work with communities, other water users, and Indigenous and First Nations groups who have long-standing spiritual and cultural relationships with the land and water.

These conversations are happening earlier in the mine planning process, and that early dialogue can make the difference between a project that succeeds with community support and one that doesn't move forward.

DM: Tailings remain a huge part of mining, yet many sites still inherit old habits. Where do you see the biggest legacy risks, and how should companies factor future liabilities into decisions today?

TB: Let me stay on the water theme. One legacy example I've worked on is a molybdenum mine in northwest New Mexico. It operated for decades, eventually shifting to an open-pit model. Today, the long-term water treatment obligation tied to that site is close to \$1 billion dollars in present-value terms, a liability not every company could absorb.

Had that operator understood the long-term treatment costs upfront, they might have managed or relocated waste differently, or even changed the mining method. Another example is a proposed mine in northern Minnesota.

Despite strong science and community engagement, concerns about watershed disturbance ultimately led the board to shrink the mine's footprint, reducing reserves and impacting economics, but avoiding potential long-term liabilities.

Both cases show the same lesson: the trade-off between making a commitment and inheriting one later. Responsible planning today can prevent costly obligations tomorrow.

DM: The Global Industry Standard on Tailings Management was created to address these very risks. What does it change in practice, and how does it strengthen engagement through closure?

TB: The Global Industry Standard on Tailings Management (GISTM) was a wake-up call for the industry. It recognized that as mines grow larger and more complex, the systems we create – tailings dams, pipelines, impoundments – demand deeper understanding and better governance.

GISTM pushes us to integrate knowledge from all stakeholders. It reinforces the concept of free, prior, and informed consent and requires clear understanding of uncertainties and potential failure modes.

It's led to the creation of independent technical review boards that challenge design assumptions, and to the use of new data streams that monitor and predict risk areas.

Ultimately, this transparency, through regular reporting to communities and investors, helps us make better, safer decisions that protect both people and the environment.

DM: Finally, from SRK's perspective, what gives you optimism that the industry can close the gap between compliance and true sustainability?

TB: Devan, I think it comes down to experience and collaboration. Consulting firms like SRK – and academic groups such as The Tailings Center – are bringing together engineers, scientists, and industry leaders to innovate how tailings are managed.

We're advancing concepts like integrated landforms, where waste rock and tailings are co-mingled to improve long-term stability. We're developing technologies to reduce water use and to leave facilities that are physically and chemically stable long after closure.

What makes me optimistic is seeing global collaboration grow, from Canada to Australia. For example, I recently visited the Sustainable Minerals Institute at the University of Queensland, where researchers are tackling the same challenges: how to plan, operate, and transition responsibly into post-mining life.

The right people are focused on the right issues, and that's a very good sign for the future.

DM: Terry Braun, President of SRK North America, thank you very much for joining us.

TB: The pleasure's been all mine, Devan. Thank you.

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