

THE MINE SITE REHABILITATION PROCESS

Each year, mine pits that have had the ore removed and roads that are no longer needed are rehabilitated. The long term objective of Alcoa's mine rehabilitation is to establish a self-sustaining jarrah forest ecosystem, planned to enhance or maintain conservation, timber, water, recreation and other forest values. Alcoa's rehabilitation process has been developed and improved over the past 45 years, and currently involves a number of important steps.

Pre-ripping and landscaping

Pre-ripping breaks up the compaction of the pit floor caused by heavy rubber-tyred mining equipment. A bulldozer with a winged tyne attached rips the floor of the pit; this helps roots to penetrate through the soil profile.

Large rocks are buried, vertical pit faces are flattened down and the pit floor is smoothed to blend the mined area into the surrounding landscape.

Soil return and final contour ripping

The overburden and topsoil layers are returned. Wherever possible, fresh topsoil is directly returned to rehabilitated areas from pits that have been recently cleared. This maximises the topsoil seed store, which is important for maximising the number of plant species in rehabilitated areas.

Final contour ripping is undertaken on contour to increase the soil's water storage capacity. This contour ripping is undertaken with a multi-tine or a winged tine. Contour ripping creates mounds in the rehabilitation which are important for erosion control. In flat areas and areas with a low potential to erode, the rip lines may be partially flattened by a heavy bar dragged behind the ripping dozer.

Seeding

Seeding is achieved in the same process. Attached to the dozer which performs the contour ripping is a mechanical seeding machine which spreads the rehabilitation seed mix behind the dozer. This seed mix has been specially formulated by Alcoa's Marrinup Nursery and contains 50-80 species and is applied at a rate of about 1 kg per hectare.

Recalcitrant planting

Despite a large amount of research, there are some species that Alcoa is unable to establish from the seed in the topsoil or applied seed mix. These plants include many grasses and sedges that produce little viable seed. Alcoa grows seedlings of these species through tissue culture (cloning) or cuttings at the Marrinup Nursery, and plants these seedlings by hand in the rehabilitated areas.

Fertilising

To improve the establishment and early growth rates of trees and understorey in revegetated areas, fertiliser is applied by helicopter to the newly rehabilitated areas during August of each year. The fertiliser has high levels of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium which can be limiting to the growth of plants in newly rehabilitated areas if not present at adequate levels.

Ongoing monitoring and management of rehabilitated areas

In March each year when the rehabilitation is 9 months old, the previous year's rehabilitation is monitored to check that the number of established plants meets targets agreed by DEC (Department of Environment and Conservation) and Alcoa, and to identify any areas which need further treatment to control weeds or repair any erosion damage.

At 15 months of age, botanical species richness (number of different plant species) is monitored against internal and government standards.

Relinquishment of mined areas to the State

Alcoa's regulatory body (the Mining and Management Program Liaison Group) in consultation with the community and other stakeholders have developed a set of Completion Criteria for rehabilitation areas. Due to improvement in rehabilitation standards and techniques, two sets of completion criteria exist for pre-1988 and post-1988 rehabilitation. These criteria were developed to allow government agencies to assess whether rehabilitation is of a satisfactory standard so that Alcoa can hand the land back to DEC for future management.

South Dandalup Dam Western Australia

Mining (1981).



Rehabilitation (2001)

