

THE MINERAL INDUSTRY OF

BELIZE

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Formerly the British crown colony of British Honduras, Belize has been an independent member of the Commonwealth with a Governor General who has represented the Queen since 1981. The country is slightly larger than El Salvador but has the sparsest population density of any Central American country. About 92% of its area is forest and woodland. Extraction of construction materials constituted the principal mining activity in Belize and amounted to less than 1% of the gross domestic product (GDP), which was estimated to be \$700 million in 1998 with a real growth rate of 0.5% that year and a GDP per capita of \$3,000. Gross exports amounted to \$95.3 million versus gross imports of \$147.9 million in 1998. Belize's largest trading partner was the United States (Central Intelligence Agency, 1999).

Without a Pacific Ocean coastline, Belizean settlements have tended to be along the Caribbean coast, with limited access inland. Because of the annual hurricane threat, however, the capital city of Belmopan was located inland about 50 kilometers (km). In recent years, the building of infrastructure inland, particularly roads and highways, has required continuous exploitation of natural construction materials.

Mining activities were regulated by the Mines and Minerals Act of 1988, which did not include petroleum. Although clays, limestone, marble, and sand and gravel for construction and civil works were the mainstay of Belize's mineral production, a very small amount of gold has been produced yearly by stream panning.

Prior to 1988, the nation's mineral production was largely by private companies under contract to the Government's Department of Public Works. Since 1988, the Government's Geology and Petroleum Office has administered mineral permits, licenses, and concessions. Prospecting licenses for base metals, clays, and limestone were held by fewer than five foreign companies in the early 1990's. A petroleum consortium that comprised Petrofina (Belgium), Deminex (Germany), Dover Technology (United States), and Magellan Petroleum (Australia) planned to drill offshore near Glover's Reef, which is part of a prized barrier-reef system. The project was delayed by controversy over an environmental impact statement and an environmental management plan (Latin American Economy and Business, 1996).

For the most part, the geology of Belize comprises younger limestones but with an older inlier ("window") of granites,

basalt or dolerite dikes, rhyolites, and sedimentary sandstones and shales, the latter showing some metamorphic alteration. The rock types would seem to represent a diversity sufficient to encourage exploration for base and precious metals. In this connection, aside from the small amount of placer gold extracted from time to time, occurrences of barite and gypsum, as well as anomalous values for beryllium, molybdenum, and lead in stream waters, have been reported (Bateson and Hall, 1977, p. 33).

Of the 2,710 km of roadways, about 500 km was paved road and the remainder gravel or loose-surface roads. Truck transportation was used extensively. The country also had one airport with a paved runway of between 1,524 and 2,437 meters (m) and two airports with paved runways of less than 914 m in length.

Belize will probably realize a steadily growing demand for construction materials as the country develops its infrastructure and fosters increased tourism. Beyond this, however, is the prospect of new discoveries of base and precious metals and the realization of a greatly enhanced mineral industry in support of a growing economy.

References Cited

- Bateson, J.H., and Hall, I.H.S., 1977, The geology of the Maya Mountains—Belize: Institute of Geological Sciences Overseas Memoir 3, 43 p.
Central Intelligence Agency, 1999, Belize: The World Factbook 1999, p. 45.
Latin American Economy and Business, 1996, Belize: Latin American Economy and Business, March, p. 6.

Major Source of Information

Geology and Petroleum Office
Ministry of Natural Resources
84-36 Unity Blvd.
Belmopan, Belize

Major Publication

- Garcia, E. Mineral Resources of Belize, C.A. Transcript of presentation at the Belizean Studies Conference, Belize City, October 26, 1990.

TABLE 1
 BELIZE: ESTIMATED PRODUCTION OF MINERAL COMMODITIES 1/ 2/

(Thousand metric tons unless otherwise specified)

Commodity	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	
Clays	2,200	2,250	2,600	2,600	2,600	
Dolomite	29	29	30	30	31	
Gold	kilograms	5	5	5	6	6 p/
Lime	metric tons	1,100	1,200	1,200	1,250	1,250
Limestone		310	310	310	315	320
Marl		1,200	1,100	1,300	1,300	1,300
Sand and gravel		320	320	350	360	360

p/ Preliminary.

1/ Estimated data are rounded to no more than three significant digits.

2/ Includes data available through March 15, 2000.