The Mineral Industry of Malta

By Harold R. Newman

The Maltese archipelago consists of three inhabited islands—Malta [which covers an area of 245 square kilometers (km$^2$)], Gozo (67 km$^2$), and Comino (2.8 km$^2$)—and four other uninhabited islands. Malta’s political and strategic importance has traditionally been linked to its geographic position in the center of the Mediterranean Sea and its natural deepwater harbor. The Maltese islands are relatively young geologically; the oldest rocks date back to the Tertiary Period some 30 to 35 million years ago and are for the most part composed of marine sedimentary rocks (Euro-Mediterranean Information System, 2010).

The mineral industry, which consisted mainly of limestone and salt production, did not contribute significantly to the gross domestic product. The Malta Resources Authority (MRA) is a public corporate body with regulatory responsibilities relating to energy (including petroleum exploration), mineral resources (including quarry operations), and water (including the regulation of energy and water utilities) in the Maltese islands. The MRA was set up by the Maltese Parliament through the Malta Resources Authority Act of 2000 (Malta Resources Authority, 2010a).

The mineral-related economy of the country depended mainly on trade and the storage of crude oil in the Malta Freeport. Malta Freeport Terminals Ltd. was established to develop the Malta Freeport to offer modern transshipment facilities, storage, and assembling and processing operations, including an oil terminal with bunkering facilities. The transshipment and reexport of goods in 2010 continued to be significant to the country’s economy. In 2010, the Malta Freeport handled almost 2.4 million 20-foot (ft) equivalent units (TEUs). A TEU is a 20 ft by 8 ft by 8 ft intermodal shipping container. A standard 40 ft by 8 ft by 8 ft container equals two TEUs. The Freeport’s infrastructure comprised an operational 2-km-long quay, a dredged water depth along all mainline berths of 15.5 meters (m), and a total area of 615,000 square meters for container storage. In 2010, Malta continued to be an important transshipment center in the Mediterranean area (Malta Freeport Terminals Ltd., 2010).

In 2010, Malta’s total exports were valued at an estimated $2.5 billion and total imports were valued at an estimated $3.9 billion. Exports to Malta from the United States in 2010 were valued at $424 million. U.S. imports from Malta in 2010 were valued at $264 million. The European Union countries as a group were Malta’s principal trading partners (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a, b).

Production

Malta has few natural resources, and the only exploited mineral resources in 2010 were limestone and evaporated (solar) salt. Quarrying was done mainly by small family-operated businesses, as were the solar salt operations.

Two types of limestone were quarried, both by open pit. Limestone known locally as Franka, or softstone, was quarried from the Lower Globigerina Limestone Formation and was the main material for building construction. Limestone known locally as hardstone was quarried from the Lower and Upper Coralline Limestone Formations. These deposits produce crushed aggregates and a harder material known locally as Malta Marble that can be polished and used for tiling (Malta Environment and Planning Authority, 2010).

Malta depended almost completely on imports of raw materials and fuels. All mineral production was for domestic consumption (table 1).

Structure of the Mineral Industry

Several small stone quarries were in operation on Gozo and Malta islands. Available information regarding ownership, production, capacity, and location, however, was inadequate to prepare a Structure of the Mineral Industry table for Malta.

Commodity Review

Mineral Fuels

Petroleum.—The Oil Exploration Department (OED) of the MRA implements and administers the provisions of the Petroleum Production Act, Chapter 156, as amended; the Continental Shelf Act, Chapter 194, as amended; and the Petroleum (Production) Regulations, Subsidiary Legislation 156.01, as amended. The OED administers related petroleum exploration activities, including promoting exploration, analysis of data, keeping of samples and data, monitoring contractual obligations, and overseeing exploration activity on Malta’s continental shelf. Malta’s exclusive economic zone has an extensive marine area that neighbors the areas offshore Libya and Tunisia and is in the same geologic province (Malta Resources Authority, 2010b).

Heritage Oil plc of the United Kingdom entered into a production-sharing contract (PSC) with the Government for a 100% interest in Areas 2 and 7 in the southeastern offshore region of Malta in 2007. The licenses cover about 18,000 km$^2$ and were located off the southeastern coast of Malta in water depths of about 200 to 400 m. The licenses were not well explored; the only well had been drilled in 1980, and that well failed to reach the target horizons. Areas 2 and 7 are close to a number of producing wells offshore Libya and Tunisia (Heritage Oil plc, 2010).

Leni Gas & Oil plc (LGO) of the United Kingdom was an international oil and gas exploration, development, and production company. LGO (10% interest) and Mediterranean Oil & Gas plc (90% interest) had established a joint venture to explore offshore southern Malta in Area 4, Blocks 4, 5, 6, and 7. The joint venture planned to initiate drilling in one of the blocks.
by July 2011. Four prospects and five leads have been delineated in a 5,700-km² area. The joint venture was undertaking various geoscience studies and data acquisition surveys to firm up the proposed drill targets. Area 4 was governed by a PSC with the Government and included a commitment to drill by July 2011 (Energy-pedia News, 2010)

**Outlook**

Malta’s entrepôt activities in the Mediterranean area are expected to continue, as is the country’s offshore exploration for petroleum. Industrial minerals will likely continue to be produced for domestic consumption.

**References Cited**


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**TABLE 1**

MALTA: ESTIMATED PRODUCTION OF MINERAL COMMODITIES¹,²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commodity</th>
<th>2006</th>
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<tr>
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<td>6,000</td>
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<td>6,000</td>
<td>6,000</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

¹Estimated data are rounded to no more than three significant digits.
²Table includes data available through April 30, 2011.
³In addition to commodities listed, small amounts of cement, fertilizer, lime, and plaster are produced, but available information is inadequate to make reliable estimates of output.