Mineral Resources of Illinois

Subhash B. Bhagwat

Long before the French explorers came to Illinois, the indigenous people of the area were using Illinois minerals. They formed pottery from local clay, shaped tools from flint, and carved fluorite into trinkets. They also mined and carved galena and produced small amounts of lead. Salt was produced from mineral springs. Evidence exists to show that minerals were traded down the Mississippi River.

In the 1670s, Joliet and Marquette reported the occurrence of coal and other minerals in Illinois. The construction of the Illinois and Michigan Canal in 1848 and the building of railroads promoted mineral production, especially coal. The industrialization that occurred between the Civil War and World War I gave rise to large iron and steel centers around Chicago and St. Louis. Coal production reached its all-time high of 90 million tons (81.6 million tonnes) toward the end of World War I, and production of other minerals also flourished. Illinois’ mining industry has contributed significant quantities of zinc, lead, clay, silica sand, fluorite, tripoli, and building stone to the state’s economy. Crude oil production in Illinois began in significant quantities in 1906, reaching its peak at almost 150 million barrels a year during World War II.

The increased use of automobiles and the development of the interstate highway network in the 1950s, the development of the coal industry in the western United States in the 1970s, and the residential and industrial construction boom have contributed to the value of Illinois non-fuel minerals, estimated at about $1 billion. The total value of all minerals and fuels produced in Illinois is estimated at about $2.2 billion annually.

Mineral resource extraction competes with other land uses everywhere in the United States, including Illinois. Environmental concerns further add to the difficulty in mineral extraction. Nevertheless, Illinois remains endowed with abundant mineral and fuel resources that could supply the needs of the state for generations to come. Their continued use and economic viability will depend on policies put in place today.

In this part of the book, discussion of Illinois mineral resources is divided into chapters on coal; oil and gas; zinc, lead, and fluorite; and industrial minerals.
Image on previous page: Oil pump at Salem Field, Marion County, Illinois.