

California's top minerals tabulated

Construction sand and gravel ranks No. 1; State produces about \$3.3 billion in non-fuel minerals a year

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SACRAMENTO -- What's the top mineral in California? No, not gold, which "made" the barely settled region into a state a century and a half ago with the Gold Rush.

The top mineral is somewhat less glamorous: It's construction sand and gravel.

According to a new California Geological Survey report, boron minerals, portland cement, crushed stone, and gold rounded out the top five commodities in a state with total mineral production valued at \$3.3 billion in 2012, the year covered in the report.

"Mention mining or mineral production in California, and people automatically think 'gold,' " says State Geologist John Parrish. "That's a tribute to the Gold Rush's historical importance. The truth is, the more common and mundane minerals that are the backbone of construction are the biggest part of California's modern mining industry."

California led the U.S. in the production of construction sand and gravel in 2012, producing 84.9 million tons valued at \$843 million – more production but less value than revised 2011 totals. Preliminary figures for 2012 show the first increase in the volume of construction sand and gravel produced since 2007.

"Construction materials -- sand and gravel, crushed stone, and cement -- accounted for about 55 percent of the state's total non-fuel mineral production in 2012," says John Clinkenbeard, who heads the California Geological Survey Minerals Program. "California consumes large quantities of those materials each year. They're essential both to maintain the existing infrastructure and to provide for new construction."

California produced more than two-dozen different non-fuel mineral commodities in 2012. It was the only U.S. state to produce boron compounds and rare earth minerals, an important component of many high tech products. All domestic rare earth elements are produced from the Mountain Pass Mine in San Bernardino County, operated by Molycorp Minerals LLC.

Boron minerals rank second in value among California commodities in the 2012 report, but because there are only two producers of boron minerals in the state, specific production values are withheld to protect company proprietary information. Boron is used in many products, including pharmaceuticals, bleach, insulation, ceramics, and insecticides.

The No. 3 mineral commodity produced in California was portland cement, valued at \$621 million for 9.3 million tons produced. Crushed stone ranked fourth with a value of \$319 million for 36.5 million tons produced.

California gold production decreased to 186,980 ounces in 2012, from a revised 2011 production of 198,770 ounces. The value of gold production decreased to \$312.7 million from a revised \$332.5 million in 2011.

The state's largest gold producer was the New Gold Inc., Mesquite gold mine in Imperial County at 142,000 ounces for the year. The other major California producer of gold was the Atna Resources Ltd., Briggs mine in Inyo County, which produced about 36,900 ounces in 2012.

There were about 700 active mines in California producing non-fuel minerals during the year. About 5,300 people were employed at those mines and their processing facilities, according to the California Employment Development Department.

The CGS report is based on preliminary data compiled by the U.S. Geological Survey.