

SELENIUM AND TELLURIUM



# Indian Minerals Yearbook 2017

(Part- II : Metals & Alloys)

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**SELENIUM AND TELLURIUM**

**(FINAL RELEASE)**

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# 14 Selenium and Tellurium

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**S**elenium and tellurium are rare elements widely distributed within the Earth's crust. They do not occur in concentrations high enough to justify mining solely for their content. They are recovered as by-products, mostly from anode mud or slime obtained during electrolytic refining of copper. Tellurium is found mostly in tellurides associated with metals such as bismuth, lead, gold and silver. It is found with selenium in the anode slime from electrolytic copper refineries.

## EXTRACTION

Selenium and tellurium metals were being recovered as allied products at Ghatsila Copper Smelter of HCL in Jharkhand, where the annual installed capacity to produce selenium was 14,600 kg. HCL has not reported production of selenium since 2006-07 and that of tellurium since 2004-05. HCL has developed its own Precious Metal Recovery Plant at ICC successfully. Presently, the plant is not operational. A tellurium recovery plant has also been developed by R & D Wing. Hindalco Industries Ltd reported 73,870 kg production of selenium from imported copper concentrates at its Dahej Smelter in Gujarat during 2010-11 and thereafter no production data is available.

## USES

### Selenium

Selenium is used as a decolourising agent in the Glass Industry. Approximately, 1 kg selenium is used for about 150 tonnes of glass production. It is also used in architectural plate glass to reduce solar heat transmission. High purity selenium compounds were used principally as photoreceptors on the drums of older plain paper copiers which are gradually being replaced by newer models that do not use selenium in the reproduction process. Dietary supplement for livestock is the largest agricultural usage of selenium. Also, selenium is known to be added to fertilizer to enrich selenium-poor soils.

Selenium is added to steel, copper and lead alloys to improve machinability which enables faster

production with better surface finish and casting properties. Selenium is added to low antimony-lead alloys used in the support grids of lead acid storage batteries. The addition of 0.02% selenium by weight as a grain refiner improves the casting and mechanical properties of alloy. Metallurgical applications of selenium also include its use in the production of electrolytic manganese metal (EMM), wherein about 2 kg of  $\text{SeO}_2$  is required per tonne of electrolytic manganese metal produced.

Selenium is proving to be a useful Solar PV material in increasing the efficiency of absorption of light.

Chemical uses of selenium are in industrial and pharmaceutical applications. The principal pharmaceutical use of selenium is in anti-dandruff hair shampoos. Selenium is also used as a human dietary supplement. Other industrial chemical uses are as lubricant, rubber compounding catalysts and as a promoter in the reformation of naphtha.

In pigment applications, selenium is used to produce colour changes in cadmium sulphide-based pigments. Sulphoselenide pigments have good heat stability, resistant to light and chemical attack and hence are used in ceramics, plastics, paints, inks and enamels. Selenium is used in catalysts to enhance selective oxidation and in plating solutions to improve appearance and durability. It is also used in blasting caps and gun bluing.

The use of selenium in glass has increased due to higher colourless glass production. The use of selenium in fertilizer and supplements in the plant-animal human chain and as human vitamin supplements increased as its health benefits were documented. The use of selenium in copper-indium-gallium-diselenide (CIGD) solar cell has increased.

Selenium is recovered from used electronic and photocopier components and recycled. The estimated global use of selenium was in metallurgy (40%), glass (25%); agriculture; chemicals & pigments; electronic (10% each) and other industries (5%).

## Tellurium

Tellurium (Te) demonstrate properties similar to those of elements known to be toxic to humans and has application in industrial processes, which is rapidly growing in importance and scale. Tellurium is used principally as an alloying element in the production of free-machining low carbon steel, where additions up to 0.1% tellurium greatly improves machinability. It is also used as a minor additive in copper alloys to improve machinability without reducing conductivity. Tellurium catalysts are used chiefly for the oxidation of organic compounds and also in hydrogenation and halogenation reactions. Tellurium chemicals are used as vulcanising and accelerating agents in processing of rubber compounds. It finds use as a component of catalysts for synthetic fibre production that is increasingly used in cadmium-tellurium-based solar cells. In plain paper copiers and in thermoelectric and photoelectric devices, tellurium is used along with selenium. Mercury-cadmium telluride is used as a sensing material for thermal imaging devices. Tellurium is also used as an ingredient in blasting caps and as a pigment to produce colours in glass and ceramics. High purity tellurium is used in alloys for electronic applications.

## SUBSTITUTES

The use of selenium as an alloy to substitute for lead in plumbing continued to increase in response to requirements of Public Law for safe drinking Water Act Amendment 1996. High-purity silicon has replaced selenium in high-voltage rectifiers and is the major substitute for selenium in low and medium voltage rectifiers and solar photovoltaic cells. Other inorganic semiconductor materials, such as, silicon, cadmium, tellurium, gallium and arsenic as well as organic photoconductors are the substitutes for selenium in photoelectric applications. Cerium oxide is substitutes of selenium as either a colorant or decolorant in glass. Amorphous silicon and organic photoreceptors are substitutes of selenium in plain paper photocopiers. Sulphur dioxide can be used as a replacement for selenium dioxide in the production of electrolytic manganese metal.

Several materials can replace tellurium in most of its uses, but usually with loss in production efficiency or product characteristics. Bismuth, calcium, lead, phosphorus, selenium and sulphur can be used in place of tellurium in many free-machining steels. Several of the chemical process reactions catalysed by tellurium can be carried out with other catalysts or by means of non-catalytic processes. The chief substitutes for tellurium were selenium and sulphur in rubber compound applications and selenium, germanium and organic compounds in electronic applications.

## WORLD REVIEW

### Selenium

The world reserves of selenium at 1,00,000 tonnes only cover the estimated contents of economic copper deposits. Selenium was obtained as a by-product with copper. Substantial resources also exist in association with other metals, and in uneconomic copper deposits (Table - 1).

In 2016, the total world production of refined selenium for which data is available was at 3,666 tonnes. The chief producers were Germany (22%), China (20%), Japan (21%), Belgium & Russia (5% each) (Table - 2).

Global selenium and tellurium output cannot be determined easily because not all companies or countries report production and because trade in scrap and semi-refined products may be included with refined metal trade data.

**Table – 1 : World Reserves of Selenium  
(By Principal Countries)**

(In tonnes of Selenium content)	
Country	Reserves
<b>World: Total (Rounded off)</b>	<b>100000</b>
Canada	6000
China	26000
Peru	13000
Poland	3000
Russia	20000
USA	10000
Other countries	21000

*Source: Mineral Commodity Summaries, 2018. USGS*

SELENIUM AND TELLURIUM

**Table – 2: World Production of Refined Selenium  
(By Principal Countries)**

Country	(In tonnes)		
	2014	2015	2016
<b>World total</b>	<b>3467</b>	<b>3514</b>	<b>3666</b>
Belgium <sup>(e)(a)</sup>	200	200	200
Canada	154	154	176
Chile	41	50 <sup>(e)</sup>	50 <sup>(e)</sup>
China	670 <sup>(e)</sup>	720	750
Finland	94	93	104
Germany <sup>(e)</sup>	700	790	790
Japan	782	772	753
Kazakhstan <sup>(e)</sup>	130	130	130
Mexico	120	99	126
Peru	49	40	40 <sup>(e)</sup>
Philippines <sup>(e)</sup>	70	70	70
Poland	90	87	82
Russia	131	143	197
USA <sup>(e)</sup>	160	90	122
Other countries	76	76	76

Source: World Mineral Production, 2012-2016. BGS

Note: In addition to the countries listed, Australia, Iran, the Republic of Korea and Zimbabwe are believed to produce refined selenium.

(a): includes selenium produced from imported material.

## Tellurium

The world reserves of tellurium were at 31,000 tonnes contained in copper resources. Concentration of tellurium could also be found in lead and gold deposits. The quantities of tellurium in deposits of coal, copper and other metals that are of sub-economic grade are several times the amount of tellurium contained in identified economic copper deposits (Table-3).

More than 90% of tellurium is produced from anode slimes collected from electrolytic copper refining and the remainder is derived from skimmings at lead refineries and from flue dust and gases generated during the smelting of bismuth, copper and lead ores. The anode slimes of copper and lead refineries normally contain about 3% tellurium. The chief producers of refined tellurium in the world in 2015 were USA, Japan, Sweden, Russia and Canada contributing an estimated 167 tonnes to the world production compared to 162 tonnes produced in 2014 (Table-4).

**Table – 3 : World Reserves of Tellurium  
(By Principal Countries)**

Country	(In tonnes of Tellurium content)
	Reserves
<b>World: Total (Rounded off)</b>	<b>31000</b>
Canada	800
China	6600
Peru	3600
Sweden	670
USA	3500
Other countries	16000

Source: Mineral Commodity Summaries, 2018. USGS

**Table – 4 : World Production of Refined Tellurium  
(By Principal Countries)**

Country	(In tonnes)		
	2014	2015	2016
Canada	9	9	18
China	180 <sup>e</sup>	210	210
Japan	32	34	28
Russia	33	34	40
Sweden	31	33	39
USA <sup>e</sup>	50	50	50

Source: World Mineral Production, 2012-2016. BGS

Note: In addition to the countries listed Germany and Belgium are also believed to produce refined tellurium.

## China

An audit of the Fanya Metal Exchange (FME), ordered by the Kunming Government, raised concerns that 170 tonnes of tellurium could be released to the spot market and result in a significant market surplus. The FME's issues were initiated in April, when clients of the FME were unable to withdraw funds from the Ri Jin Bao investment product. The product was based on metal that were to be used in electronics and had promised returns of more than 13% per year. Reportedly, more than 2,20,000 investors had purchased the Ri Jin Bao product, with an estimated value of 43 billion yuan i.e. \$ 6.77 billion. In October, the Yunnan Provincial Government instructed the municipal government of Kunming to launch an official investigation into FME. The key points of the investigation were to determine if the FME had made up trading items, concealed facts, created a capital pool and taken control of the funds within and illegally possessed and used the funds that it had raised. In November,

## SELENIUM AND TELLURIUM

when FME's Web site was shut down, warehouses reportedly still contained 337.8 tonnes of selenium and 170 tonnes of tellurium.

Canadian speciality metal producer 5N Plus Inc. announced at the Minor Metals Trade Association annual conference that they anticipated that tellurium was going to be oversupplied for the foreseeable future, with consumption around 450 to 550 tonnes per year and production estimated at 550 to 650 tonnes per year. With all the demand being met, 5N does not see any incentive for companies to recycle tellurium.

### FOREIGN TRADE

#### Exports

Exports of selenium during 2016-17 were almost more than doubled at 203 tonnes as compared

to 85 tonnes in the preceding year. Exports were mainly to China (62%), UAE (19%), Hong Kong (11%) and Belgium (3%). Exports of tellurium during 2016-17 was only one tonne. There was negligible exports of tellurium in the previous year. Bangladesh was the sole importer country (Tables-5 & 6).

#### Imports

Imports of selenium during 2016-17 increased drastically by 70% to 539 tonnes as compared to 317 tonnes in the preceding year. Imports were mainly from Japan (28%), Korea, Rep of (16%), Belgium (15%), Uzbekistan and Germany (7% each), China (6%). During 2016-17, imports of tellurium were only 2 tonnes remained same as in the preceding year. Imports were only from two countries namely Hong Kong and China (50% each). (Table- 7 to 8).

**Table – 5 : Exports of Selenium  
(By Countries)**

Country	2015-16 (R)		2016-17 (P)	
	Qty (t)	Value (` '000)	Qty (t)	Value (` '000)
<b>All Countries</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>97482</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>257267</b>
China	74	66728	125	151693
UAE	++	16	38	42228
Hong Kong	-	-	22	27588
Belgium	-	-	7	10944
Netherlands	-	-	5	9954
Canada	9	28379	3	7797
Indonesia	-	-	1	2009
USA	-	25	++	1693
Iran	-	-	++	675
Australia	++	341	++	279
Other countries	2	1993	2	2407

**Table – 6 : Exports of Tellurium  
(By Countries)**

Country	2015-16 (R)		2016-17 (P)	
	Qty (t)	Value (` '000)	Qty (t)	Value (` '000)
<b>All Countries</b>	<b>++</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>59</b>
Bangladesh	-	-	1	57
Singapore	++	6	++	2
Saudi Arabia	++	95	-	-
Malaysia	++	13	-	-

## SELENIUM AND TELLURIUM

**Table – 7 : Imports of Selenium  
(By Countries)**

Country	2015-16 (R)		2016-17 (P)	
	Qty (t)	Value (` '000)	Qty (t)	Value (` '000)
<b>All Countries</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>527902</b>	<b>539</b>	<b>527923</b>
Japan	93	147988	150	176405
Belgium	62	109793	79	91430
Korea, Rep. of	113	194119	85	84510
Germany	19	37798	36	39610
China	8	8847	34	39144
Uzbekistan	-	-	40	23563
UK	10	14776	15	19081
Philippines	-	-	21	12604
Russia	9	9915	10	11743
Switzerland	-	-	9	8579
Other countries	3	4666	60	21254

**Table – 8 : Imports of Tellurium  
(By Countries)**

Country	2015-16 (R)		2016-17 (P)	
	Qty (t)	Value (` '000)	Qty (t)	Value (` '000)
<b>All Countries</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>16249</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>13212</b>
Hong Kong	-	-	1	4429
China	2	8642	1	3760
UK	++	1446	++	1619
Belgium	++	1096	++	1502
Germany	++	103	++	1060
Philippines	-	-	++	459
USA	++	587	++	151
Russia	-	-	++	117
Japan	++	563	++	115
Canada	++	3760	-	-
Other countries	++	52	-	-

## **FUTURE OUTLOOK**

The supply of selenium is dependent on the supply of main product from which it is derived, copper and also to a lesser extent by the supply of nickel where the nickel production is from sulphide ore. The selenium prices are often inversely related to the supply of the major product from which it is derived-copper.

China has been purchasing large quantities of crude selenium. As this material becomes scarcer, the prices for standard grade selenium may rise. The combination of these two factors, the decline of selenium containing concentrates from North America and the growth of Chinese demand, should firm up the prices for selenium in the short term.

Demand for selenium in photoreceptors is likely to continue to decline as the cost of substituting organic compounds decreases. The Photoreceptor Industry which was once a major consumer of selenium and tellurium has reached

the replacement stage. Selenium has been substituted by alternative material in newer models.

Further, use of selenium in cancer prevention and other health applications may eventually lead to increased consumption of the metal. Dosages taken directly for human consumption will not include large increase in demand for the metal because only minute quantities are necessary for effective therapy.

The demand and supply of tellurium has remained fairly balanced for a decade. In short term, significant increases are not anticipated in either consumption or production, although reduction in copper production may have a bearing on tellurium supply. An increase in demand for high purity tellurium for cadmium telluride solar cells might have a major impact on tellurium consumption. The use of tellurium alloys used in DVD's consumes only small amounts of tellurium and will, therefore, have minimal impact on tellurium demand.