

Zimbabwe's Lithium Export Ban



The global lithium-ion battery market is worth US \$78.9 billion and is likely to amount to US \$349.6 billion by 2034

Zimbabwe holds the largest lithium reserves in Africa, and the sixth largest globally.

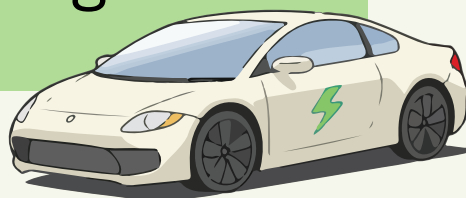
Lithium is an essential mineral for the energy transition, leading to increased global demand



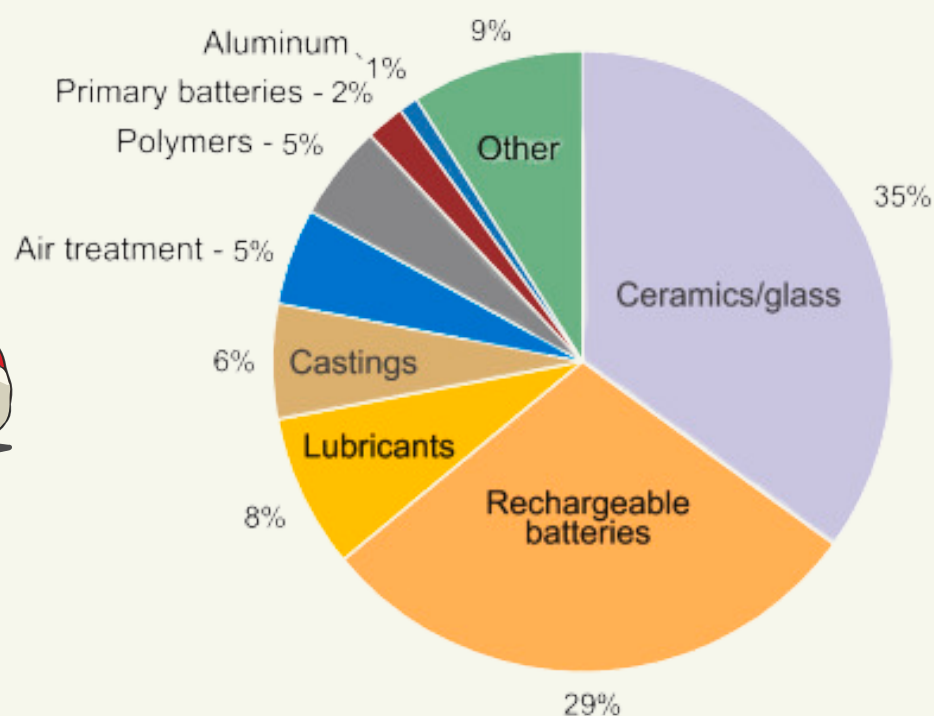
Did you know?

Lithium from Bikita Mines - one of the oldest lithium mines in Africa - was used in the Apollo Space Program.

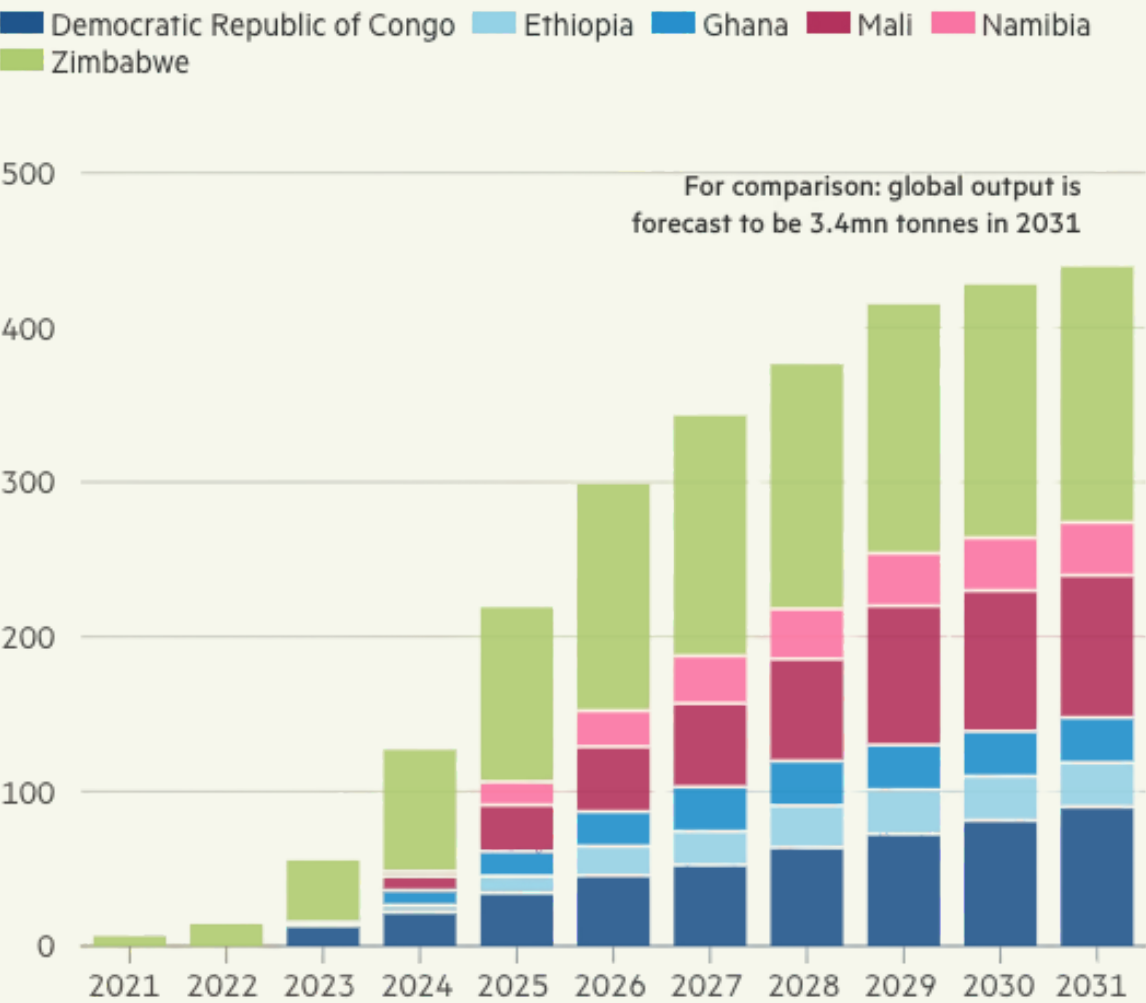
Lithium is a critical component for electric batteries, used in electric vehicles, mobile phones, computers- earning the nickname 'white gold'



Lithium's Uses



Forecast mine output (thousand tonnes of lithium carbonate equivalent)



FINANCIAL TIMES

Source: Rystad Energy, BatteryMaterialsCube

Since December 2022, the country banned the export of raw lithium through three successive Statutory Instruments (SIs) - SI 213 of 2022, SI 5 of 2023 and S I57 of 2023). These SIs sought to encourage the establishment of beneficiation plants, and eventually, manufacturing industries, so as to localize higher stages in the lithium value chain and capture associated economic benefits.

Zimbabwe's lithium mining industry experienced a boom, notably from 2021 onwards, following the emergence of Mnangwawa's 'New Dispensation' government and the rise in global demand for lithium-ion batteries.

Cumulative investment in the lithium mining industry between 2021 and 2024 was over US\$1 billion with the industry accounting for a significant number of foreign investment licenses issued by the country's investment authority. Most of the lithium mining companies are majority Chinese-owned.



Initially, the Zimbabwean government announced that the export of lithium concentrates would be banned beginning January 2027 in favour of higher value (battery-grade) products such as lithium sulphate and lithium carbonate.

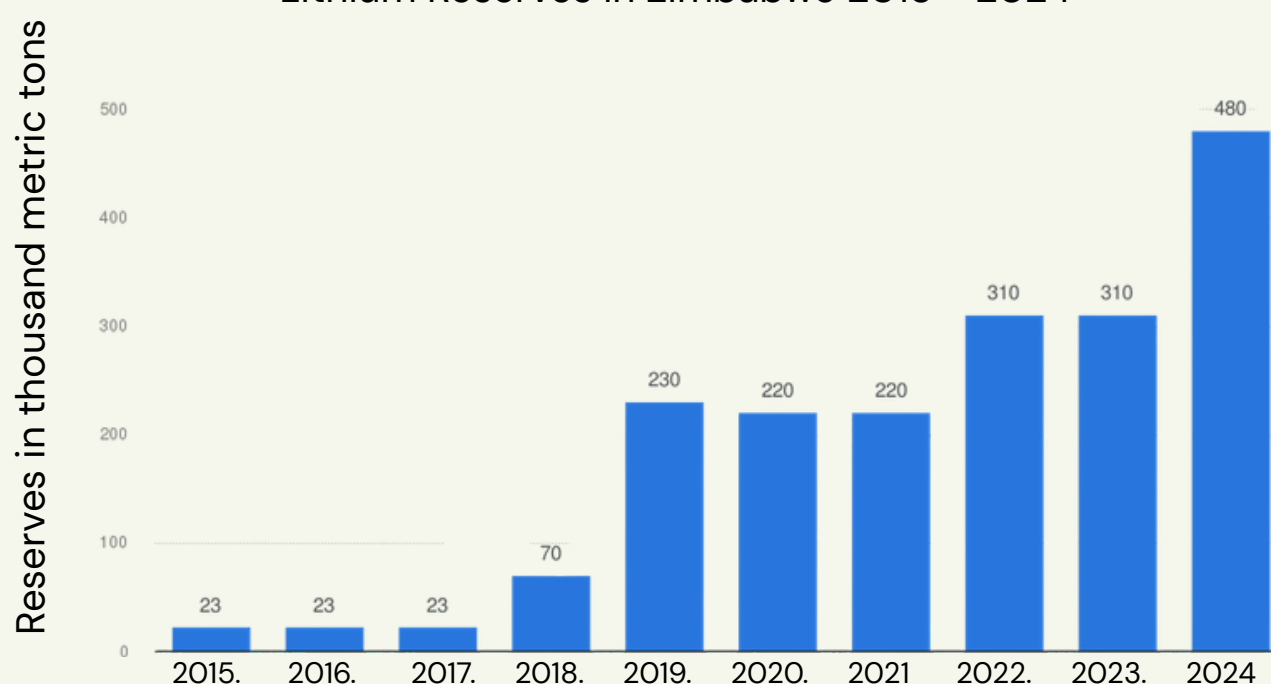
On **25 February 2026**, Zimbabwe's Minister of Mines and Mining Development announced the **immediate** implementation of the lithium concentrate export ban, accelerating the original timeline. The government justified the decision by citing concerns over weak regulatory oversight and revenue losses.

Key reasons included:

- mining companies' failure to report the discovery of associated minerals such as rare earth elements (REEs), niobium, and tantalum to the Zimbabwe Geological Survey;
- the omission of these minerals from export declarations;
- abuse of temporary export permits;
- under-reporting of lithium grades to reduce tax liabilities;
- illicit stockpiling of lithium concentrates and ores in neighbouring countries;
- and a sharp increase in raw lithium exports as companies sought to take advantage of the remaining exemption period before the planned January 2027 deadline.

Battery-grade lithium carbonate sells for about **\$7,000 per ton** on the Shanghai Metals Market, in contrast to **\$570 per ton** for Zimbabwe's raw lithium concentrate

Lithium Reserves in Zimbabwe 2015 – 2024



After the 25 February 2026 export ban on concentrates, the Minister introduced **export quotas** as a way of controlling the amount of concentrate exports and ensuring that tangible progress towards the establishment of lithium sulphate or carbonate plants is made.

The export quotas can only be granted to producing mines with approved processing plants, and the quotas stipulate the maximum amount of concentrates that can be exported by the grantee over a year.



On **22 May 2026**, Zimbabwe's Minister of Mines announced a **Critical Minerals Classification** schema covering 14 strategic minerals, including lithium. In announcing the classification system, the Minister banned unprocessed exports of these minerals, while also indicating that government minority equity participation in the producing mines will be mandated through special-purpose vehicles (SPVs).

While the classification schema currently remains a policy measure without legal force, legislation is expected through a forthcoming Statutory Instrument.

The effect of the export ban and quotas have largely been positive:

- the restrictions have helped to reduce illicit trade and enhanced the transparency of export flows.
- Arcardia Lithium Mine has already commissioned a lithium sulphate plant and is working on producing lithium carbonate.
- Bikita Minerals has indicated plans to commission a 100,000-ton lithium sulphate plant by end of 2026.
- Sabi Star Lithium Mine plans to commission its own sulphate plant by end of 2026.
- Kamativi Mine plans to commission its own plant by either late 2026 or early 2027.



Challenges

Prohibitive Import Costs

- High import costs for processing chemicals and specialized equipment reduce the competitiveness of domestically beneficiated mineral products in international markets.
- The competitiveness of domestic lithium processing depends on strategic investments in ancillary industries.

Enforcement Gaps

- There is an urgent need for a computerised export management system (CEMS) and its integration with the mining cadastre.
- Limited analytical and laboratory facilities constrain the state's ability to independently verify mineral grades, quantities, and export values through effective assaying.

Institutional Capacity

- The Ministry of Mines and Mining Development, which is responsible for regulating and overseeing Zimbabwe's rapidly expanding lithium sector, faces significant capacity constraints, including limited staffing, inadequate financial resources, and insufficient technical infrastructure, particularly at the provincial and district levels.

Legal and Policy Frameworks

- Develop and implement comprehensive policy and legal frameworks, including a well-defined Critical Minerals Strategy, to provide clear strategic direction, strengthen regulatory coherence, and establish robust systems of accountability across the lithium value chain.

