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Proposal could bring hundreds of new jobs | Jobs hope as coalfield plan moves forward

By Rachel Norris



HOPES of a jobs boost for Eskdale and Liddesdale workers have risen after two potential developments moved closer to fruition.

Testing for a new coalfield near Canonbie, which is potentially worth billions of pounds, has reached another important stage.

New Age Exploration (NAE), the Australian firm behind the plans, is looking at the mothballed military depot in Eastriggs to set up a transport hub linked to the project.

NAE is in talks about possibly using the Ministry of Defence's old ammunition depot if its exploration work on the Lochinvar coalfield near Canonbie results in a working mine.

It confirmed the depot discussions amid speculation that it was one of the firms interested in becoming part of new industrial operations to run on part of the Longtown MoD site and as the company's latest test results were released.

Melbourne-based NAE is exploring the area for coking coal which is used to produce steel. Its licence extends from Evertown to Longtown and west past Gretna to the Solway coast in Scotland.

It is believed hundreds of jobs could be created if the project resulted in a working mine, which would be accessed by tunnels, and

more in supporting industries. One of these would be a rail hub, needed to load and transport the coal to

steel mills.

Gary Fietz, chief executive officer, said: "Our discussions with the MoD have centred more on the potential use of the abandoned MoD Eastriggs site as a possible option for surface infrastructure and train loading for the proposed Lochinvar deep coal mine.

"The Lochinvar project is still at the exploration drilling stage and we are looking at several other locations as options for surface infrastructure.

"It's too early for us to say where the location will be at this stage."

Mr Fietz said he was pleased with the latest drilling programme, in which four boreholes were drilled.

The results suggest the company will be able to upgrade the status of its estimates for the field, believed to contain more than 100 million tonnes of coal, potentially worth billions of pounds, from 'inferred' to 'indicated'.

This happens when investigation leads to great confidence in a resource. The

earliest a mine would be likely to open is 2017.

Mr Fietz said: "It has provided confidence to add two extra holes to the current programme which, if successful, will extend the indicated resource in the northern and southern parts of the deposit and enhance the scoping study

(report into feasibility) mine plan."

Commercial companies could start working from part of DM Longtown, saved from closure last year, within a year, fuelling hopes of a jobs boost.

A senior trade union official at the depot understands that plans to lure commercial work – jobs from which, it is hoped, will offset pending redundan-

cies from the military operations – are progressing well. The depot will remain open with about 180 staff but 77 posts are to be axed as the number of storehouses is cut.

Plans to develop the site commercially, with the depot's rail hub, internal track network and connections to the main rail network, are seen as major selling points.

Luis Eckersley, of the Prospect union, said: "Over the course of the next few months a company will be appointed to market it Europe-wide."

Buccleuch Estates, which is among those exploring the Canonbie coal and gas fields has previously said it recognises "the potential for commercial activities" at the site.