

West Coast mines struggle to find workers

Ellen Curnow

West Coast mines are struggling to fill jobs, mine managers told a recent minerals forum in Westport.

Bathurst Mining chief executive Richard Tacon said there were just 50 or 60 employees at Stockton when he took over in 2015.

"I'd already been made sort of redundant when I took over. I thought, I'll keep doing this for one year and we'll make enough money during that one year and then we'll shut it up. That way when it all goes to shit the workers we have now can actually get redundancy."

But the market for coal had recovered and the mine kept operating, Mr Tacon said. There are now about 300 people, including contractors, working there.

Westland Mineral Sands' managing director Ray Mudgway said his company was "hiring all the time". It had employed about 40 people since kicking off its Tauranga Bay heavy mineral sand mine

in December last year. Elect Mining's Westland goldmine operator Jayde van Dissel and Mr Mudgway tussled over recruitment.

"We're hiring too," Mr van Dissel said. "Yeah, but we pay the best," Mr Mudgway said.

Mr van Dissel said mining brought jobs and growth to the community. But workers were the "hardest asset" to find.

Mr Mudgway said New Zealand was a "low sovereign risk" country to mine in.

"Think about some of the other countries where they're producing our minerals. People get shot on the way to work. And that's really bad for morale."

It could be hard to get consent to mine in New Zealand.

"But once we're in, we're stable."

Mr Mudgway believed sand mining would be a 100-year industry on the West Coast.

Reefton's gold rush is set to take off and several companies need gold miners.

Australian-owned Federation Mining

vice president Simon Delander said about half the Reefton workforce had never worked in a mine before.

"We've been bringing in people with agricultural backgrounds, farming backgrounds and training them to mine. That's been quite successful."

Federation received a \$15m loan from the Government's Provincial Growth Fund to explore whether it could mine 700,000 ounces of gold from Snowy River at Waitua near Reefton.

Underground superintendent Jackie Bock said Federation had already drilled two new 3.3km tunnels from private land into the historic workings and 850m into the Birthday Reef.

In January, it was granted resource consents from the Buller District Council and the West Coast Regional Council to build a processing plant and a water treatment plant.

Mr Bock said 57 people were currently working in the area.

"In the next two years we have to dewater the mine's old workings, continue mining at the rate of 250m a month, achieve our consent requirements and build our workforce from 57 to 160," he said.

