

A new Force in DRC lithium

Klaus Eckhof's success with AVZ Minerals Ltd at the Manono lithium project in the DRC has enticed two other Australian juniors to chase pegmatites in the country.

AVZ has captured the market's attention in recent months with a series of wide, high-grade hits at Manono, including 235m @ 1.66% lithium, with the company's stock up almost 400% since July.

Led by former Moto Gold Mines boss and renowned geologist Eckhof, AVZ raised \$15 million in August on the back of its exploration success at Manono and has already attracted strong interest from major Chinese players in the lithium space.

Now AVZ has two major competitors in the region with Force Commodities Ltd and Taruga Gold Ltd recently pegging ground on the Katanga belt.

Subject to due diligence, Taruga is set to acquire up to 65% of a permit about 80km from AVZ's project.

Force (formerly Sovereign Gold) has already completed technical due diligence over the Kitotolo lithium project, 40km from Manono, and has moved swiftly to formalise a JV with local company Cominiere SA.

With experienced African mining executive Jason Brewer now leading a new board of directors, Force is chasing an opportunity never previously exploited in east-central DRC.

"None of the licences were previously mined for lithium, it was all cassiterite and coltan," Brewer told **Paydirt**.

"The due diligence report came back very positive, highlighting visible spodumene and widespread pegmatites across that Kitotolo licence, with some very shallow pegmatites.

"Historically the Manono mine was undercover and it's only been through tin mining that these large pegmatites have been exposed. Our geos have gone there over a four-week period and basically come back with a very positive recommendation that allowed us to commit to the project."

James Sullivan, who consulted to AVZ during that company's own due diligence, was last month appointed Force's head of exploration. At the time of print, Sullivan was finalising a schedule and budget for the next 12 months of exploration work at Kitotolo.



Force Commodities has acquired the Kitotolo lithium project, near AVZ's Manono project, in the DRC

Further mapping of the 380sq km licence is likely to be first on the agenda for the company in a bid to delineate the true extent of the exposed pegmatites which are understood to extend for several kilometres.

Sampling and trenching work will follow before the first rigs are expected on site in the second half of 2018.

Assay results of up to 2.15% lithium from a limited reconnaissance channel test pit and rock chip sampling programme were reported in the technical due diligence, with shallow pegmatites and lithium mineralisation also confirmed in artisanal workings still to be tested for



Assays grading up to 2.15% lithium were reported during due diligence on Kitotolo

depth and strike extensions.

"It's really difficult to appreciate just how big an opportunity this is, how extensive the pegmatites are and how best to prove up that initial resource," Brewer said.

"I don't think you'll find a better appointment than James Sullivan to do that. He's worked in the DRC, he's worked for AVZ and he was really the only competent person who could review the projects on our behalf and make recommendations as to the project's viability and its prospectivity for additional discoveries of large-scale lithium deposits along this regional trend."

Force is not a first mover on lithium in the DRC and Brewer said the company would attempt to leverage off AVZ's early success on the neighbouring permits at Manono.

"On the back of what AVZ have achieved over a very short period of time, they have already

started to attract significant attention from Chinese investors and that creates a substantial opportunity for us," he said. "There's going to be some significant investment put into infrastructure, so that area around Manono-Kitotolo is going to offer a lot of opportunities.

"Whilst a number of Western companies have been deterred from investing in the cobalt space in the DRC – because as we know the DRC accounts for a majority of the world's cobalt production – Chinese groups have not been afraid to invest very heavily both in the mines and associated infrastructure.

"The DRC is going to be integral to the world's supply of cobalt going forward for a long, long time, and now you can see the potential for lithium as well on the back of the size of the operations AVZ are alerting us to."

Brewer said Force would seek to divest the Mt Adrah gold-zinc project in New South Wales which until recently was the company's flagship asset.

"We think at the moment every dollar put into the DRC is going to be worth \$10," he said. "You're just not going to see anywhere near that sort of return for the Australian assets."

– Michael Washbourne