

## NORTH AMERICA

# Retirement on hold for lithium p-iioneer

By his own admission, James Calaway could be happily retired and enjoying “life on the ranch”.

US-based Calaway is best known to Australian investors as the successful former chairman of Orocobre Ltd, having guided the company from early development to establishing itself as one of the world’s leading producers of lithium carbonate before stepping down in mid-2016 after eight years at the helm.

Around the same time, iioneer Ltd managing director Bernard Rowe was completing the acquisition of the Rhyolite Ridge lithium-boron project in Nevada for his own company. Less than a year later, Calaway had agreed to become chairman for what he described as “the finest new opportunity in the world for lithium”.

“It’s what gets me up in the morning,” Calaway told **Paydirt**.

“The truth of the matter is I’m 62 years old now and I’ve been fortunate to have built some very successful businesses so I don’t need to work to make more money...but the thing that is driving me and will have all my attention until I can’t work anymore is this opportunity to build a sustainable society for my children and my grandchildren and all the other kids.

“This is one of the most important projects in the world to help with the sustainability of our future and I really don’t know what else there is to think about because I’m so excited about what we have. So, I’ll stay involved in this full-time until I go out there and see it all running in good shape.

“Maybe then they can have a ceremony and put me to pasture or something like that, but this is where I plan to finish my career. I really want to see iioneer build this as a demonstration of the kind of character we have as a company so that we can continue our mission to build the materials that are



Outcropping lithium-boron mineralisation at Rhyolite Ridge in Nevada, US

necessary for a sustainable planet. If we do that, there will be a sense of having achieved some purpose higher than myself.”

While he has essentially been working full-time with iioneer for more than a year, Calaway recently signed a 12-month employment contract to assist the company with a number of key activities – including environmental permitting and strategic partnering negotiations – due to the current COVID-19 related travel restrictions on Australian-based personnel, including Rowe.

Both of those milestones, along with completion of detailed engineering, are considered integral towards having Rhyolite Ridge in a “shovel-ready” position as early as Q2 next year. It comes on the back of the company publishing a robust DFS in late April which supported development of a 2.5 mtpa mining and processing operation capable of producing 20,600 tpa lithium carbonate and, from the fourth year onwards, 22,000 tpa battery-grade lithium hydroxide.

Pre-production capex is estimated at \$US785 million, but it is the company’s anticipated AISC of \$US2,510/t LCE which has garnered the most praise given its expected position at the far left of the all-important cost curve.

“I think people who have delved into it really appreciate the level of detail that we went to because it really sets this project and this feasibility study apart from any other in the lithium space,” Rowe said.

“All in all, it was very well received and I

think it was exactly what some of the potential strategic partners were looking for in a project like this, which at the end of the day is a one-of-a-kind process. That process is not unusual and there’s no new technologies, but it’s a one-of-a-kind deposit that has needed a very bespoke approach to how you process the material.”

Baseline environmental studies were more or less completed in line with the DFS, with a draft of the mandatory plan of operations recently submitted to the Bureau of Land Management, the federal government authority which issues permits for mines on US federal land.

Key air and water quality permit applications have also been completed and submitted to the relevant regulatory bodies.

Rowe, who has more than 15 years’ experience as an explorer in Nevada, said getting a project such as Rhyolite Ridge permitted for mine development was an incredibly straightforward process.

“Over my time in Nevada, the regulatory environment has changed – and I think it’s changed for the better,” he said.

“In the old days, companies would try and get a mine permitted and it would take five years, sometimes 10 years, but they were doing all the processes in parallel...now we have to go out and do all of these environmental studies first, which will take you about two years, and not until you’ve done all of that work can you actually start the environmental permitting process.”

Calaway said iioneer shareholders could expect plenty of good news flow over the next two years as the company targets first production in 2023 and more and more of the world’s transport becomes electrified.

“I drive a Tesla and my brother also drives an electric car,” he said. “Once you start driving one, you think ‘why would I want to go back to one of those slow putt-putt gas engines?’”

– Michael Washbourne



The iioneer team undertook extensive piloting test work as part of the recent DFS on Rhyolite Ridge