

Greenwashing Mining's Biggest Environmental Challenge

"Zero Tailings" Remains a Marketing Term That Hides Harms and Holds Back Problem-Solving, Report Finds

WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES, June 23, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Corporate claims that new mining projects don't create mine waste don't match up with current technology, according to new research released today by Earthworks.

["The Future of Mine Waste: From the Myth of Zero Tailings to Real Solutions"](#) finds that "zero tailings" projects are not a reality anywhere in the world, and that marketing claims stand in the way of the open collaboration required to safely manage mine waste for generations to come.

Deadly Failures Put Spotlight on Risks

After a deadly dam collapse in Brumadinho, Brazil, companies began to shift their vocabulary around mine waste. That industrial disaster killed 272 people and impacted the livelihoods of over 3 million people downstream. It motivated governments, investors, and other stakeholders to take the risks from mine waste more seriously.

Mines produce three things: (1) waste rock; (2) tailings, which are the waste left after processing and are often toxic; and (3) the minerals that are being mined.

Recently, some companies have been claiming their mines are "zero tailings." But the rise of projects marketed as "zero tailings" reflects public relations efforts to address public concern, not a scalable technology shift.

"We have to find ways to reduce tailings to avoid their social and environmental harms globally," said Jan Morrill, International Senior Mining Manager at Earthworks. "But the technology for complete tailings elimination is not there yet. We need collaboration, innovation and accountability to make it real. Greenwashing existing projects undermines trust, wastes time, and does nothing to reduce risk."

Tailings Are Currently Unavoidable

Some mining companies have made progress to significantly reduce and repurpose tailings. But

for most projects, zero tailings is a theoretical long-term goal. Researchers found no evidence of operating mines that have eliminated tailings across all stages of production.

Even industry trade organization ICMM has called the generation of tailings unavoidable and expected for the foreseeable future.

Mining Is Waste Management

Mine waste remains the biggest single environmental challenge for the industry. Mining creates huge amounts of toxic and nontoxic waste that remains permanently in the environment. Reducing waste and managing it safely are global problems.

As mining depletes large mineral deposits and ore quality declines, the amount and toxicity of tailings are expected to increase. Mining creates about 13 billion tons of tailings each year around the globe. A 2025 study estimated that the total volumes of tailings and waste rock will likely reach 2 trillion tons by 2050.

Most tailings are stored behind massive dams that put communities, workers, and the environment at risk.

Mines Can Reduce Risk Now and Invest in Long-Term Solutions

From a technological standpoint, eliminating tailings from mining would require an integrated approach, which could include improving technology, using all extracted materials, reusing tailings for other products, and safely re-mining tailings to extract minerals that remain after processing.

Meanwhile, reducing demand for newly mined minerals can reduce the amount of mine waste. Finally, taking the urgent steps outlined in *Safety First: Guidelines for Responsible Mine Tailings Management*, a set of 17 guidelines endorsed by 164 scientists, frontline community groups, Tribal governments and civil society organizations from 32 countries, can reduce risk to people and the environment wherever tailings are being produced.

Research and Analysis Detail the Way Forward

"The Future of Mine Waste: From the Myth of Zero Tailings to Real Solutions" analyzes and summarizes commissioned research by AECOM, a leading global company specialized in environmental and infrastructure engineering whose team was led by Vice President and Brazil Country Director Vicente Mello.

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