

Long Term Availability of Copper

This page explores the long-term availability of copper, as extension material for the [Mining and Extraction: Sulfide Ores](#) and [Mining and Extraction: Oxide Ores](#) education resources. The following content is based on an original leaflet by the International Copper Association. [Click here](#) to download the leaflet, which includes references.

Geological Perspective

Typically, the future availability of minerals is based on the concept of reserves and resources. Reserves are deposits that have been discovered, evaluated and assessed to be economically profitable. Resources are far bigger and include reserves, discovered deposits that are potentially profitable, and undiscovered deposits that are predicted based on preliminary geological surveys.

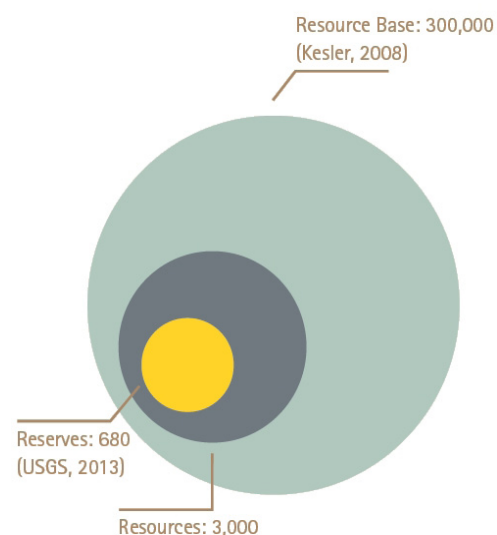
According to the latest science of the United States Geological Survey (USGS), copper reserves amount to 680 million tonnes (USGS, 2013) and copper resources are currently estimated to exceed 3,000 million tonnes (USGS, 2013). The latter does not take into account the vast amounts of copper deposits found in deep sea nodules and submarine massive sulfides.

Current and future exploration opportunities will lead to increases in both reserves and known resources; of the around 1,000 copper projects targeted for future exploration, nearly 100 are already under construction (Intierra, 2011).

It is also important to note that copper is naturally present in the Earth's crust at a concentration of about 67 parts per million (ppm). Thus the total amount of copper in deposits above 3.3 km, a likely limit of future mining, is estimated at 300,000 million tonnes (Kesler, 2008).

Reserves in Contrast to Production

Since 2000, 180 million tonnes of copper have been mined. In that same period, however, known reserves have increased by



*World copper reserves and resources
World copper reserves and resources in
million tonnes.
(Courtesy of USGS and Kesler.)*

290 million tonnes. As a result, the reserves/production ratio has increased from 26 to 39. Since 1950, according to USGS data, there has always been, on average, around 40 years of copper reserves and over 200 years of resources left. This reflects the timeframes, technological advances and evolving economics of mining.

Based on the global copper stocks and flows model recently developed by the Fraunhofer Institute, it is estimated that two thirds of the 550 million tonnes of copper produced since 1900 are still in productive use (Glöser, 2013).
Of this amount:

- approximately 70% is used for electrical applications, 30% for non-electrical applications.
- around 55% is used in buildings, 15% in infrastructure, 10% in industry, 10% in transport and 10% in equipment manufacture.

Innovation in Recycling and Mining

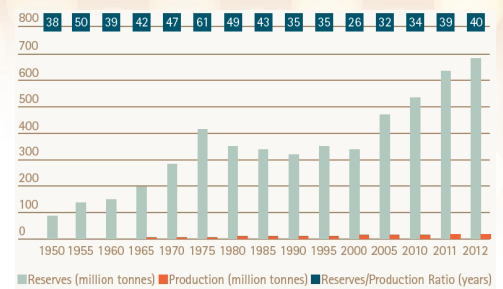
Technology has a key role to play in addressing many of the challenges faced by new copper production. Innovation led by the copper industry aims to:

- increase the success rate in deep exploration and other more difficult areas;
- create safer conditions to operate in extreme environments;
- reduce energy consumption and water consumption;
- increase recovery rates in the mill to enable producers to process more complex ores.

These and other as yet unknown innovations will ensure new mine production continues to provide vital copper supplies.

In addition, recycling of copper plays an important role in copper availability. Today's primary copper is tomorrow's recycled material, or secondary copper. Currently around 9 million tonnes of copper per year comes from the recycling of 'old' scrap (copper contained in end-of-life products) and 'new' scrap (scrap generated during production and manufacturing processes). This means that around 35% of annual copper use comes from recycled sources. Indeed, unlike other commodities such as energy or food, copper is not 'consumed'.

Copper is one of the few raw materials that can be recycled repeatedly without any loss of performance and key stakeholders such as policy-makers, scrap collectors, copper producers and recyclers should try to safeguard that yesterday's metal is recycled and reused.



*Historical copper reserves vs. annual copper production in million tonnes.
(Courtesy of USGS.)
[Click to view a larger version.](#)*

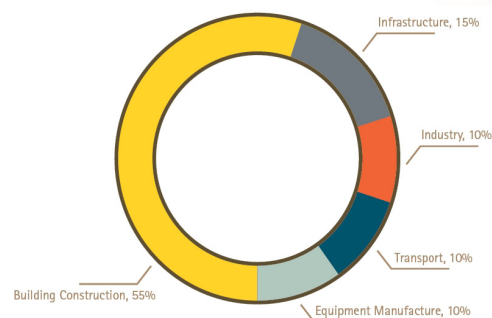
While this will ensure a progressive move towards a more sustainable economy, the loop cannot be completely closed, for two reasons. Firstly, demand will continue to increase due to population growth, product innovation and economic development. Secondly, in most applications, copper stays in use for decades.

Consequently, meeting future metals demand will continue to require a combination of primary raw materials, coming from mines, as well as recycled materials, while innovative policies and technology should continue to contribute to improvements in recycling performance and resource efficiency.

Conclusion

Copper is man's oldest metal, dating back more than 10,000 years. It still plays a vital role in addressing issues critical to society. As well as making contributions to our food and health, copper is also central to providing energy access in developing countries, allowing important improvements in energy efficiency and the growth in renewable energy sources and, from this, important reductions in CO₂ emissions.

Based on the latest knowledge about geological availability and continuous industry innovation, there are good reasons to believe that copper will continue to be a vital and positive contributor to society well into the future.



Global copper usage. (Courtesy of Glöser.)
[Click to view a larger version.](#)

Copper Development Association is a non-profit organisation that provides information on copper's properties and applications, its essentiality for health, quality of life and its role in technology. It supports education through a collection of resources spanning biology, chemistry and physics. These materials have been developed in conjunction with the Association for Science Education, and reviewed by teachers.

For more resources, visit www.copperalliance.org.uk/education.