



ABOUT SPHERICAL GRAPHITE (“SPG”)

Spherical graphite is manufactured from flake graphite concentrates produced by graphite mines and is the anode material used in lithium ion batteries (“LiBs”). SPG can be sold as either a coated or uncoated product. Uncoated SPG is made by micronizing, rounding and purifying flake graphite. Almost all natural, uncoated SPG is currently manufactured in China due to low costs and weak environmental regulations. It is essentially a commodity which sells for approximately US\$2,500 per tonne. There is substantial excess capacity in China and margins are very low despite inexpensive raw material costs, low labour rates and their weak environmental regulations. Northern Graphite does not believe a business case can be made for investment in a new graphite mine based on producing uncoated SPG at current prices.

Typically, three tonnes of flake graphite concentrate are required to produce one tonne of SPG due to losses during the initial micronizing and rounding stages and this represents the major cost. Northern and some other companies have reported yields in the 50 per cent range.

Generally, flake graphite between 100 and 150 mesh in size (“small flake”) is used. Medium and large flake can also be used and there is evidence that yields are better. However, prices are higher for the larger sizes and it does not make economic sense to turn them into SPG at current prices. Flake concentrates smaller than 150 mesh in size are generally not used because yields decline and purification becomes more difficult.

The flakes must be rounded, which essentially involves rolling them up like a snowball, so that they can be spread thinly and uniformly during the manufacturing process. The round shape also results in a higher density in the battery, better rate capacity and longer life. For these reasons, “unrounded flakes” are not used to make SPG.

The micronized and rounded material is then purified from approximately 94%C to 99.95%C using hydrofluoric and sulphuric acid as impurities affect battery performance. On its own, this wet chemical purification is a low cost process but large quantities of fresh water are required to rinse the graphite. Costs increase if neutralizing agents are added and proper environmental practices are followed.

Thermal purification can be used but it is very expensive and air emissions are a problem. Northern has developed a proprietary hybrid purification process that does not involve the use of strong acids. Northern’s flake concentrate has a highly ordered, pristine crystal structure without large quartz grain impurities which are difficult to remove. The process will probably not work on graphite concentrate from all deposits.

Coating is the final stage in producing SPG. Coated SPG is an engineered product that results from a multi step process developed by the large Japanese, South Korean and now Chinese companies who treat the process as a trade secret and do not publicly disclose it. Coated SPG prices of US\$8,000-\$12,000 per tonne reflect the cost and complexity of this stage. Companies wishing to enter this field must not only figure out how to do it, they must then go through a rigorous and extensive qualification process to actually have their product used in batteries. The costs and complexities of making coated SPG are generally underestimated and reported high margins based on production cost estimates of less than US\$3,000/t are unrealistic.

The suitability of flake concentrates for use in making SPG, and the various processes for making SPG, are first tested in coin cells which are a relatively quick and inexpensive means of evaluating their performance. However, coin cells are inadequate to fully qualify a new material with a battery company. Full qualification requires extensive life and durability testing in real LiBs (such as 18650 cells or pouch cells), including industry standard calendar and cycle life testing and standard lot-to-lot quality control and process control analysis. Such testing procedures are well documented and are available at the USCAR website: (http://www.uscar.org/guest/article_view.php?articles_id=86). No junior graphite company has yet reached this stage.

Northern has developed a chemical vapour deposition coating (“CVD”) coating process which has performed very well in initial coin cell tests. The Company is about to commence the 18650 cell testing stage of the qualification process.

Coin cells provide basic information on battery capacity, first cycle efficiency and cell life. The theoretical maximum capacity for natural graphite is 372mAh/g. However, there is a loss of capacity on the first charge/discharge cycle (“irreversible capacity” loss) which is a necessary thing. It is caused by the formation of a solid electrolyte interface (“SEI”) layer around the graphite due to the reaction of the graphite with the electrolyte. The formation of the SEI insulates and protects the anode from the high reducing potentials that exists in an LIB when charged to voltages of up to 4.35V. Typical SEI layer formation results in a first cycle efficiency of 92-94% for anode materials. The first cycle efficiency of the anode must be balanced with the cathode. Currently the best choice of cathode for automotive applications are NMC and NCA which have first cycle efficiencies of about 94%. Since the first cycle efficiency of the cathode and anode need to be balanced, it is both undesirable and likely impractical to develop a graphite material with a first cycle efficiency higher than 94%. Reports of first cycle efficiencies of up to 99% demonstrate a lack of understanding of LiB chemistry and how LiBs actually work.

Anode material made with natural graphite has a higher capacity and is less expensive than synthetic graphite. Synthetic graphite has better rate capability and better cycle life. It appears longer battery life/driving distance and lower costs are preferred over faster charging as the use of natural graphite is growing much more rapidly than synthetic. According to Avicenne Research the use of synthetic graphite in batteries grew from approximately 5,000 tonnes in 2006 to 12,000 tonnes in 2013 whereas the market for natural graphite grew from 5,000 tonnes to more than 30,000 tonnes during the same period. Exports of natural SPG from China were 35,000 tonnes in 2015 (source: Benchmark). If Chinese domestic consumption is included, Northern estimates that annual natural SPG demand for flake graphite is now in the order of 50,000 tonnes. As it takes three tonnes of flake concentrate to make one tonne of SPG, battery demand for flake graphite is approaching 150,000 tpa.

The percentage of the lithium and flake graphite demand from the battery industry is similar. Lithium prices have recently spiked due to battery demand in part because the balance of demand is diverse and relatively stable. Graphite prices have not yet responded to battery demand because the balance of the market is dominated by the steel industry and its decline has to date, offset rapidly rising battery demand.

Most EV batteries use a blend of synthetic and natural to balance the strengths of each. The recipe is closely guarded but is generally thought to be around 60% natural. The trend is toward the increased use of natural due to higher capacity, lower cost and improved manufacturing standards.