



PRESS RELEASE

29th November 2010

Rock salt: an essential mineral keeps the country moving

Rock salt 'grit' is vital for keeping our road traffic moving in icy weather. What is it made of? Where does it come from? And, how much is there? All this and more is answered by the British Geological Survey (BGS).

Rock salt is the key ingredient in the 'grit' which keeps our road network moving despite ice and snow. Rock salt is composed of the mineral halite (sodium chloride) and occurs in thick beds deep beneath parts of Cheshire, Yorkshire and Northern Ireland. The UK has large resources of rock salt in the ground which are sufficient to last for hundreds of years.



Rock salt from Boulby Mine, N Yorks,



Rock salt (Halite)

(Both images: BGS©NERC)

In the UK, rock salt never occurs at the surface because the rainwater which soaks into the ground always dissolves it away. Almost all rock salt mined in the UK is used for road de-icing. Table salt, and salt used as an essential ingredient in the manufacture of products as diverse as household bleach and window glass, generally comes from brine which is pumped from the salt beds in Cheshire under carefully controlled conditions.

The salt formed between 300 and 200 million years ago, when much of Britain was covered by a shallow sea surrounded by hot dry desert lands - much like the Persian Gulf today. As the water from this sea evaporated, salt crystals formed from the brine, along with other useful minerals such as gypsum (used for wall plaster) and potash (used for fertiliser). Rock salt is mined at Winsford in Cheshire, Boulby in North Yorkshire and Carrickfergus in Northern Ireland.

Andrew Bloodworth, the BGS Head of Science for Minerals and Waste, said: "Rock salt is an important mineral which becomes critical to the British economy during winter weather. As part of our role in monitoring all UK minerals, the British Geological Survey provides a comprehensive range of information on UK salt resources, extraction, supply and consumption".

For more information download the BGS 'Salt' factsheet:
www.bgs.ac.uk/downloads/start.cfm?id=1368

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Available for interview:

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High resolution photographs are available from our ftp server:

ftp://ftp.bgs.ac.uk/pubload/cjmi/Rock_Salt/

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For further information please contact:

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The British Geological Survey

The British Geological Survey (BGS), a component body of the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), is the nation's principal supplier of objective, impartial and up-to-date geological expertise and information for decision making for governmental, commercial and individual users. The BGS maintains and develops the nation's understanding of its geology to improve policy making, enhance national wealth and reduce risk. It also collaborates with the national and international scientific community in carrying out research in strategic areas, including energy and natural resources, our vulnerability to environmental change and hazards, and our general knowledge of the Earth system. More about the BGS can be found at www.bgs.ac.uk.