

Rio airstrip, more drill lines fuel talk of its biggest find in 25 years

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And the most recent satellite fly-over shows there has been lots of activity at the discovery, 120km north-north-west of the nearest point of civilisation, Newcrest's once-great Telfer gold-copper mine.

There are new drill lines extending south by about 400m from our previous flyover, the 40-man camp is in, and the drill core lay-down area is expanding. Rio has also bulldozed a new access track to the north-west.

Despite all the activity at the late-2017 discovery, Rio has yet to confirm it is a major find. Whatever Rio is on to, it has triggered one of biggest land grabs by a single company in recent memory.

Last year Rio held 1000sqkm of the North Paterson in its own name and 1335sqkm in joint ventures.

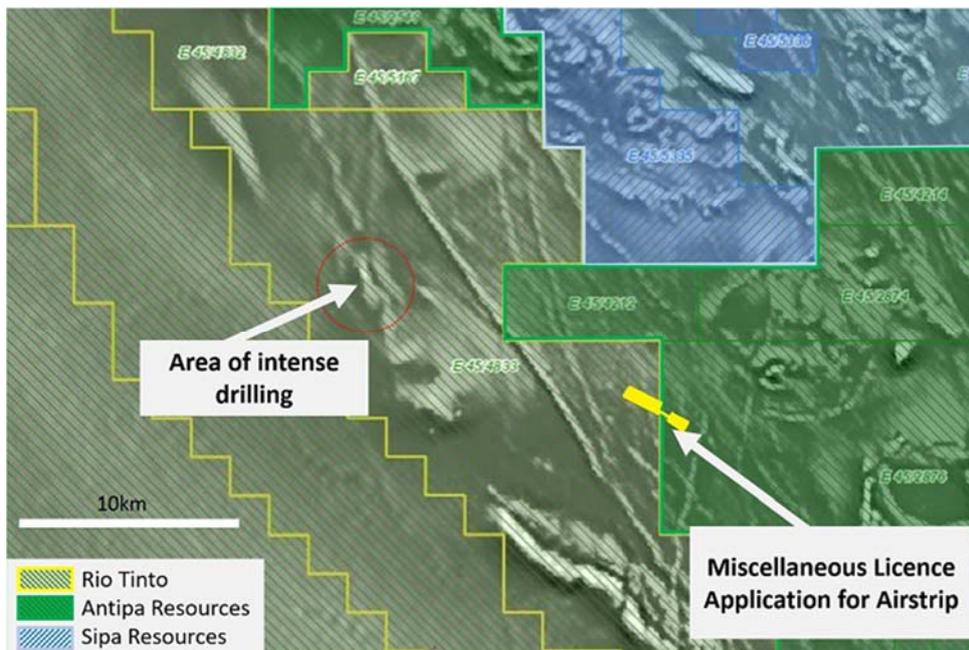
Now it's got more than 11000sqkm in its own name (all the way to the coast at Eighty Mile beach between Port Hedland and Broome) and 1760sqkm in joint venture. Oh, Fortescue has coat-tailed it in and has 5300sqkm under its belt.

To refresh the memory, the discovery was reported here in April on the strength of satellite imagery and industry chatter that Rio's drilling was returning 140m intersections of visible copper mineralisation from a depth of 40m.

More recent chatter is that it is Rio's best discovery in 25 years, that it could be as big as Mt Isa and that Rio is so annoyed by the satellite spying that it is cleaning up the drill collars and raking the surrounding sand dunes golf-style to throw us all off the trail.



Then there are the whispers from some other big-name miners - who ought to know if the broader Paterson is going to become hotter than hot on the strength of the Rio discovery - that it is the real deal.



It would be nice to know if any of that was true. But Rio is remaining silent. The decision to put in an airstrip – revealed in a miscellaneous licence application – has only served to fire up the chatter again.

Rio could well argue that as the site is at least an 8-hour drive from Port Hedland, being able to fly the 400km with the crows is simply good occupational health and safety practice, which it no doubt is.

And it must be remembered that big mining companies don't do things by halves when they think they are on to something of interest. They can just as quickly pack up and go home if the project fizzles.

But Rio's airstrip for the discovery does go to an intention to be at the location for a long time, as well as increased people movement.

And judging by the effort and speed going into proving the hush-hush discovery as something special, the data build up can't be too far off from Rio being able to make a judgement call on whether there is a need to let the WA government know, and the ASX.

Rio is of a size that means it needs to be making Tier-1 discoveries. In copper terms, that means 1 billion tonnes at 1% copper (10mt of contained copper). But discoveries don't need to be that big to move the needle.

The nearology plays

If Rio does eventually confirm it has found something special – and "if" is the operative word – it will unquestionably be great news for the juniors active in the area.

In terms of absolute proximity, we're talking about Antipa (AZY, trading at 1.4c) and Sipa (SRI, trading at 0.9c).

The pair are affectionately known as the IPAs of the North Paterson by those who like ordering their Indian pale ale at the bar as quickly as possible.

Antipa has long had Rio as the funding joint venture partner on some of its North Paterson ground and coincidentally, way over in Africa, Sipa has Rio as the funding partner in a nickel exploration play worth watching.

(As an aside, Sipa has just added a belt-scale Mississippi Valley-type zinc-lead play to its portfolio to the south-west of the Lennard Shelf MVT province in WA.)

Other Paterson players include Encounter, Red Metals, Alloy and the AIM-listed Greatland.