

MINING & MATERIAL HANDLING

Beyond the Sorter

Why Material Handling Determines the Success of Ore Sorting

A practical white paper for mine operators, engineers and project teams

Prepared by BID Canada Ltd.

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Executive summary

As ore grades decline and mineralization becomes more complex, many operations must process larger volumes of material to recover the same amount of value. At the same time, increasing material volumes place greater demands on energy use, water management and tailings handling. These pressures are driving interest in technologies that reduce the amount of material entering downstream processing.

Ore sorting is receiving renewed attention as mining operations look for practical ways to reject waste earlier, improve feed quality and reduce the burden placed on energy-intensive downstream processes. Sensor-based systems can identify differences between individual particles and separate material before fine grinding. For suitable deposits, that creates a compelling opportunity: process less waste and direct more of the plant's capacity toward material that carries value.

The ore sorter, however, is only one component of the solution. Its performance depends on what happens before and after detection. Crushing must establish a useful size range. Screening must remove fines and oversize. Feeders and conveyors must regulate the flow. The material must arrive in a stable, sufficiently separated presentation so that particles can be measured and ejected accurately. Accepted ore, marginal material and waste must then move into distinct handling routes without plugging, excessive wear or cross-contamination.

CENTRAL ARGUMENT

Ore sorting is not simply a sensor purchase. It is a material-handling system with a sensor at its decision point.

This paper explains the role of sorting in ore processing, the technologies commonly considered, the material-handling conditions that influence performance and the questions project teams should resolve before committing to a commercial installation.

1. Why ore sorting is back in the conversation

Ore sorting is not a new idea. What has changed is the operating context. Mines face pressure to make better use of lower-grade and more variable resources while controlling energy, water, consumables and tailings. At the same time, advances in sensing, computing and high-speed ejection have expanded the range of material that can be assessed at production rates.

The attraction is straightforward. Fine grinding is one of the most demanding stages of mineral processing. If barren or uneconomic rock can be identified at a coarse size and removed before it reaches the grinding circuit, the operation may avoid spending downstream capacity on material that was never likely to contribute meaningful mineral recovery.

This is why sorting increasingly appears in discussions about pre-concentration, debottlenecking, dry processing, stockpile upgrading and the reprocessing of coarse waste. It can also support more consistent feed by directing different ore classes to the most appropriate process route.

That interest should not be confused with universal applicability. A deposit must contain particles whose valuable and waste fractions differ in a measurable way. The ore also needs adequate liberation at a sortable size. Laboratory success must translate into stable performance under real feed conditions. Sortability is therefore a property to be demonstrated, not assumed.

2. What ore sorting actually does

In particle sorting, crushed rock is presented to a sensor as a stream of individual particles. The system measures a property that acts as a proxy for ore value, classifies each particle and activates an ejection mechanism to create separate product streams. Pneumatic ejection is common in high-throughput systems, while other configurations may use mechanical or hydraulic separation.

A sorter does not directly 'see grade' in every application. It measures density, magnetic response, elemental signatures, colour, surface mineralogy or another characteristic that must correlate reliably with the desired separation. The correct technology depends on the orebody, not on which sensor is most fashionable.

Technology	Primary measurement	Ore consideration
Magnetic separation	Magnetic susceptibility	Well established for magnetite-bearing material; performance depends on mineralogy, liberation and field conditions.
X-ray transmission	X-ray attenuation and atomic density	Can distinguish particles through their internal response rather than surface colour alone.
X-ray fluorescence	Surface elemental composition	Useful where the measured elements provide a reliable proxy; surface condition and measurement geometry matter.
Optical / colour	Visible surface characteristics	Applicable only where ore and waste show consistent, exposed visual differences.
NIR / hyperspectral	Spectral response of minerals	Potentially useful for mineral identification, but moisture and surface condition can affect some applications.
Laser-based systems	Surface composition, texture or geometry	May add valuable classification information when the relevant features are exposed and repeatable.

3. Where sorting belongs in the flowsheet

Sorting is commonly considered after primary or secondary crushing and screening, but before fine grinding and concentration. Other duties include sorting a pebble-crusher stream, upgrading marginal stockpiles, separating ore classes or recovering value from coarse waste. The best location is the point where useful liberation, manageable particle size and a meaningful economic decision come together.

- Mine and stockpile management establish the feed sources and expected variability.
- Crushing creates a particle size at which valuable and barren rock may be sufficiently liberated.
- Screening separates the target size fraction and removes fines that cannot be treated efficiently by a particle sorter.
- Feed regulation and particle presentation create the stable material bed needed for reliable detection.
- Detection, classification and ejection divide the feed according to the selected operating logic.
- Product handling directs accepted ore, waste and any intermediate stream to their proper destinations.

The flowsheet must also account for what happens to material outside the sorter size window. Fines, oversize and bypass material still require defined routes. Ignoring those streams during concept development often produces a neat sorter diagram but an incomplete plant design.

4. The material-handling conditions that determine performance

Controlled feed rate

A sorter performs best within a defined loading range. Surges increase bed depth and particle overlap, while underfeeding can reduce asset utilization. Surge bins, feeders, belt scales and control logic must work together to deliver a stable mass flow without starving or flooding the sorter.

Particle presentation

Each particle needs to be visible to the sensor and positioned predictably for ejection. A thick, uneven bed can cause shielding, overlapping trajectories and classification errors. The transfer from feeder to acceleration belt or chute must spread the material without creating uncontrolled bounce or segregation.

Size distribution

A narrow size range generally improves presentation and ejection consistency. Very small particles are difficult to separate individually, while oversize can exceed the mechanical or sensing limits of the equipment. Screening efficiency and recirculation strategy therefore have a direct influence on sorting performance.

Dust, moisture and surface condition

Dust can obscure optical surfaces, contaminate equipment and create housekeeping or health risks. Moisture may cause fines to adhere to larger particles or build up at transfers. Some sensing methods are less sensitive to surface contamination than others, but the surrounding system still needs appropriate sealing, extraction, cleaning and drainage.

Wear and maintainability

Ore is dense and abrasive. Chute angles, impact zones, velocities, liner selection and replaceable wear components must be considered together. Maintenance access should allow crews to service belts, sensors, ejectors, liners and dust systems safely without turning every intervention into a major shutdown.

Clean stream separation

After the ejection decision, the physical split must remain intact. Poorly designed discharge chutes can allow rebound, carryback or misplaced particles to contaminate the product. Each stream also needs sufficient downstream capacity so that a plugged waste chute does not stop the entire circuit.

5. Potential value, and where expectations need discipline

The business case for sorting is site-specific, but the potential sources of value are consistent. Early waste rejection may reduce the tonnes sent to grinding, increase the head grade entering concentration, free constrained plant capacity and reduce downstream wear, water use, reagents and tailings generation. Sorting may also turn a marginal stockpile into a usable feed source or enable separate treatment of ore classes.

The correct measure is not simply sorter recovery or waste rejection. Project teams should evaluate value across the complete system: mining and haulage implications, crushing and screening load, sorter availability, compressed-air demand, product quality, downstream recovery, waste handling, maintenance and disposal. A strong separation result can still produce a weak project if the surrounding system is expensive, unreliable or unable to handle feed variability.

A BETTER PROJECT QUESTION

Do not ask only, 'Can this ore be sorted?' Ask, 'Can this ore be sorted reliably, at the required rate, within a flowsheet that creates measurable site-wide value?'

6. A practical evaluation pathway

1. **Define the duty.** Decide whether the objective is waste rejection, grade control, stockpile upgrading, debottlenecking, process-route diversion or another outcome.
2. **Characterize representative material.** Include ore types, waste types, alteration, moisture, size distributions and realistic variability. Avoid building the case around a convenient sample.
3. **Establish intrinsic sortability.** Determine whether individual particles contain measurable differences that correlate with the desired classification.
4. **Test sensors and separation performance.** Use laboratory and pilot testing to assess detection, recovery, rejection, product grade and sensitivity to changing feed conditions.
5. **Design the full handling circuit.** Develop crushing, screening, buffering, feeding, presentation, dust control, stream separation, bypass and product-routing requirements alongside the sorter.
6. **Build a site-wide economic model.** Include capital, operating costs, air and power demand, maintenance, avoided downstream tonnes, recovery impacts and disposal requirements.
7. **Plan for control and reconciliation.** Define how feed characteristics, sorter decisions, product quality and mass balance will be monitored and adjusted during operation.

7. The role of a material-handling partner

Ore sorting technology providers bring essential knowledge of sensing, classification and ejection. A material-handling partner connects that decision point to the rest of the operation. This includes designing the structures and equipment that receive, condition, meter, present, divert and transport the ore.

For an ore sorting project, that scope may include:

- receiving hoppers, surge capacity and controlled reclaim systems;
- feeders, conveyors, belt scales and sampling points;
- screening and routing for fines, oversize and bypass material;
- transfer chutes designed for flow, wear control and clean loading;
- support structures, platforms and maintenance access;
- product, waste and intermediate-stream conveyors;
- dust containment, guarding and integration with plant controls.

The most successful projects bring the ore sorter supplier, metallurgical team and material-handling designer together early. That collaboration allows the plant to be designed around realistic material behaviour rather than forcing the handling system to compensate for decisions made in isolation.

Conclusion

Ore sorting deserves attention because it addresses a fundamental mining challenge: too much material is often processed before the operation has enough information to decide whether that material should be there. By moving a separation decision upstream, sorting can protect downstream capacity and support more efficient use of energy, water and processing equipment.

Its success, however, is earned outside the sensor housing. Consistent sizing, controlled feeding, particle presentation, wear-resistant transfers and reliable routing determine whether a promising test result becomes a dependable industrial process. For project teams, the opportunity is not merely to install a sorter. It is to design an integrated system that makes an early decision and then acts on it reliably, tonne after tonne.

About BID Canada Ltd.

BID Canada Ltd. designs and manufactures custom material-handling equipment and supporting systems for demanding industrial applications. Its capabilities include conveyors, chutes, structural steel and integrated equipment solutions developed around each project's material, operating environment and maintenance requirements.

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