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New data on the use of cobalt, a key ingredient in the most common types of lithium-ion batteries used for electric vehicles (EVs), reveals some interesting facts about leaders in the EV manufacturing industry, in particular in regard to Tesla and Volkswagen.

Cobalt particularly garners a great deal of interest because it is scarce, expensive and mostly sourced from the conflict-stricken Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where unethical mining practices implicate the industry in serious human rights issues, in particular in relation to child labour.

Tesla sold just shy of 500,000 electric cars in 2020, but it was not the biggest consumer of cobalt in the EV market. It consumed a little more than 2,000 tonnes of cobalt used in new Model 3 and Model Y vehicles which accounted for approximately 89% of its sales.

Although it sold more electric cars than Volkswagen, Tesla has used less cobalt thanks to its deal with China battery maker CATL to use cobalt-free lithium iron phosphate (LFP) batteries in Shanghai-made Standard Range Plus Model 3s.

By comparison, Volkswagen group; which came second in terms of EVs sold in 2020 at about 420,000 units; was the biggest user of cobalt in 2020, consuming nearly 3,000 tonnes of cobalt for new electric cars made by its VW, Audi, Porsche, and SEAT brands.

Third place for cobalt usage in the EV industry was claimed by Hyundai and Kia at 1,800 tonnes, 57% of which was used by Hyundai in 2020. Daimler, which makes Mercedes-Benz EQ vehicles and Smart electric cars used 1,200 tonnes while Stellantis, which makes Peugeot, Opel, Vauxhall, Citroen, DS, Fiat, Chrysler, Jeep and Chinese JV-made electric vehicles, used 1,100 tonnes.

In 2020, Tesla's impact statement outlined a plan to increase transparency in its supply chain, stating that, "Where we can be assured that minerals, including cobalt, are coming from mines that meet our social and environmental standards, we will continue to support sourcing from the DRC and other regions."

In late 2020, Volkswagen said it had joined the "Cobalt for Development" initiative alongside BMW, Google, and Samsung to develop sustainable "artisanal" cobalt mining with strictly ethical practices.

Bridie Schmidt is associate editor for The Driven, sister site of Renew Economy. She has been writing about electric vehicles since 2018, and has a keen interest in the role that zero-emissions transport has to play in sustainability. She has participated in podcasts such as Download This Show with Marc Fennell and Shirtloads



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of Science with Karl Kruszelnicki and is co-organiser of the Northern Rivers Electric Vehicle Forum. Bridie also owns a Tesla Model Y and has it available for hire on evee .

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