

During this summer's fieldwork in Chile and Argentina, I conducted 26 interviews with representatives of major mining companies, junior exploration companies, national and regional governments, and local communities in mining regions. Since returning to California, I've conducted another 10 remote interviews that followed on my fieldwork. My goal for this summer's fieldwork was to get a better sense of the copper and lithium value chains in each country, and to identify promising projects and/or regions for more in-depth fieldwork. I spent about two-thirds of my time in Chile and one-third in Argentina. In the end, I found myself focusing more on the lithium industry as a way to interrogate my central research questions. The status of lithium as an industry under creation is particularly interesting to me. I was especially drawn to the lithium industry in Argentina, which is home to many projects in the stage of exploration.

One of the more memorable experiences from this summer was my three-day visit to one of the world's largest lithium extraction sites and the world's largest lithium processing plant, both in northern Chile. I went on the visit with two professors I met who teach in the Netherlands, one of whom is originally from Colombia and the other from Mexico. We were also accompanied by a representative of the company that owns the extraction and processing sites. Visiting the region with a company representative created a certain bias in terms of perspectives to which we were exposed, but also gave us access to many situations that would otherwise have been off-limits. I find it important to keep these considerations in mind as I analyze the data from this visit.

Our first day, we met with a woman who lives in a community near the extraction site to better understand some community perspectives on the project. The next day, we visited the extraction site itself. The site sits in an endorheic basin in a high desert plateau and consists of about 25 square miles of evaporation ponds surrounded by enormous piles of waste. A company representative drove with us through the site, visiting each of the stages of the extraction process and explaining them. At the end, we reached a viewpoint from where we could see most of the facility. Seeing the ponds in person and the sheer scale of the facility was a powerful experience. That evening, we drove with the lithium-containing trucks down the long mining road to the port city where the lithium processing facility is located. The third day, we visited the lithium processing facility. An employee walked us through the processing stages, ending with the lithium powder that is the end product for this company. Afterward, this lithium will be shipped to companies around the world for the manufacture of lithium-ion batteries and other products.

Visiting these and other lithium-related sites in Chile and Argentina gave me a much clearer, more grounded understanding of multiple key stages of the lithium supply chain. The Tinker / CLACS Field Research Grant made this opportunity possible.