Fortescue green lights $4bn truck deal

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Body

Fortescue chairman Andrew Forrest has challenged the mining sector to follow his company's lead after signing a "jaw-dropping" $US2.8bn ($4.06bn) deal with German company Liebherr, which will convert two-thirds of the company's mining fleet to zero-emissions battery technology over the next couple of years.

Core to the deal is ***Fortescue***-developed fast-charging technology which will robotically deploy a 6MW charger, which can charge a haul truck in 30 minutes, providing six hours of run time.

Dr Forrest, speaking to The Australian from the MINExpo event in Las Vegas, said the deal was likely close to, if not the, largest single mining equipment deal in Australian mining history.

"We invite all companies in the mining, heavy industry and haulage sectors to join us," he said. "The solutions are there, and the missing ingredient is leadership.

"The time of others persuading you that greenwashing is a better return to shareholders and your community is over." Dr Forrest said the size of the deal was "jaw-dropping".

"It really does point the way for the future of the mining industry going zero emissions, and it points the way for heavy industry running out of excuses," he said.

"If these two companies are issuing their largest agreements ever, and it's 100 per cent zero emissions, then that tells you which way heavy industry, particularly the mining industry, is going. This is where the smart end of town is going. This is where we're leading, and we're doing it for shareholders." Under the deal with Liebherr, ***Fortescue*** will buy 360 autonomous, battery-electric trucks, 55 electric excavators and 60 battery-powered dozers. The deal is an expansion of an agreement struck between the two companies in 2022, for 120 haul trucks.

Fortescue developed the battery technology to be used in the haul trucks and jointly developed the Automated Haulage Solution, with the trucks employing a robotic charging system which will avoid issues such as having to queue machines for charging.

"All of the trucks in this fleet will ultimately be equipped with a zero-emission battery power system developed by ***Fortescue*** Zero and the jointly developed Autonomous Haulage Solution - both of which were built to be scalable so they can be retrofitted on to existing Liebherr haul trucks," ***Fortescue*** said. "This means that trucks purchased today are already future-proofed for tomorrow.

"The AHS, which was co-developed using both companies' expertise, also includes an energy management system that co-ordinates the static recharge assignments for the trucks and ensures the charger is fully utilised without causing queuing on site.

"Equipped with robotic connection options, the charger can provide up to 6MW of power and charge the current battery-electric T 264 in 30 minutes." The new T 264 trucks will begin onsite validation at ***Fortescue***'s Pilbara operations at the end of 2025, the company said.

"The approximately 360-strong T 264 truck fleet has already begun arriving to ***Fortescue***'s Western Australian operations, with the first trucks delivered to ***Fortescue***'s Eliwana mine in October 2023," the company said. "The initial 240-tonne capacity trucks will be converted to zero-emission powertrains before 2030.

"However, most of the fleet will be supplied in battery-electric configuration from first arrival." Four autonomous trucks are in validation at ***Fortescue***'s testing site, the company said, with the first deployment of operational autonomous trucks expected in the first quarter of 2025.

"All T 264 trucks are arriving autonomy-ready and will be progressively deployed to autonomous operations across ***Fortescue***'s sites," it said. "Validation of the full autonomous battery-electric solution is expected to be complete in early 2026." The new vehicles, once in operation, will represent about two-thirds of the current mining fleet at ***Fortescue***'s operations.

Fortescue Metals chief executive Dino Otranto said the charging solution, which had its genesis in technology developed by ***Fortescue*** for electric car racing, was the "disruptive technology".

"A year ago, nobody would have even thought about a 6MW charger," he said. "And in fact, we've got a concept called boost charging in the works, which could bring the current charging time of minutes down to seconds, and that will unlock even further productivity increases.

"As it stands, the first-generation charger and power system combination is already a better offering than its diesel equivalent in the market." Other companies will also be able to buy the technology, with Mr Otranto saying there was already strong interest at the MINExpo event. The deal also includes the supply of 55 R 9400 E electric excavators, while a zero-emissions dozer is under development.

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