Destination Countries for Australian Lead Exports

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Australia has been one of the world's great suppliers of lead since Broken Hill lead mining began over 140 years ago. In 2024, Australia exported US$1.29 billion worth of elemental lead: US$614 million as raw ores and concentrates and a further US$678 million as unwrought lead metal (United Nations Statistics Division 2026). Where that lead goes depends entirely on which form it leaves in, and one destination, the United Kingdom, is invisible in most summary statistics despite being the largest single buyer of Australian lead metal.

Terminology explained

Lead ores and concentrates (Harmonized System code HS 2607): raw mineral concentrates from the mines, requiring smelting overseas before use.

Refined lead (HS 780110): lead smelted and refined to high purity in Australia, shipped as ingots ready for manufacturing.

Other unwrought lead, or lead bullion (HS 780199): lead that has been smelted but not refined to final purity. Nearly all of Australia's exports under this code are lead bullion sent abroad for final refining.

Combined total: ores and concentrates plus all unwrought lead (HS 2607 + HS 7801), the fullest picture of elemental lead leaving Australia.

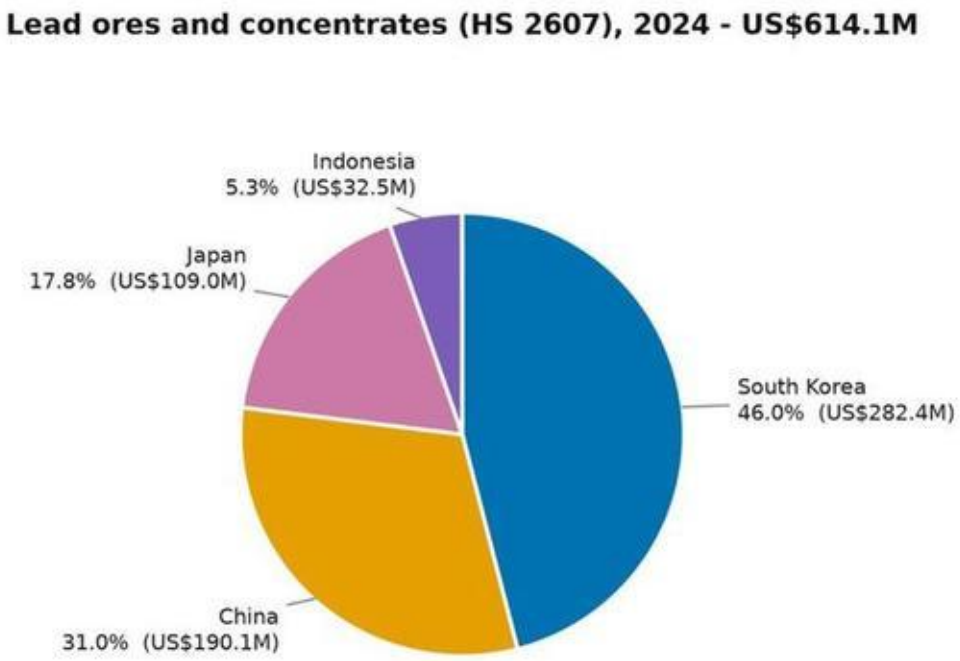


Figure 1. Australian exports of lead ores and concentrates (HS 2607) by destination, 2024. India (US$0.13M, under 0.1%) not labelled. Data: UN Comtrade, Australia-reported

Where Australian lead goes

Raw ore goes almost entirely to three East Asian smelting nations: South Korea (46.0%), China (31.0%) and Japan (17.7%), with Indonesia taking most of the remainder (United Nations Statistics Division 2026).

Lead metal tells a different story. Of the US$677.6 million in unwrought lead exported in 2024, almost half (49.0%, US$331.9 million) went to one country: the United Kingdom. Every dollar of the UK trade is lead bullion (HS 780199) shipped for final refining, while the refined ingots (HS 780110) spread across the United States, Vietnam, South Korea, the Philippines and some seventeen other markets (United Nations Statistics Division 2026).

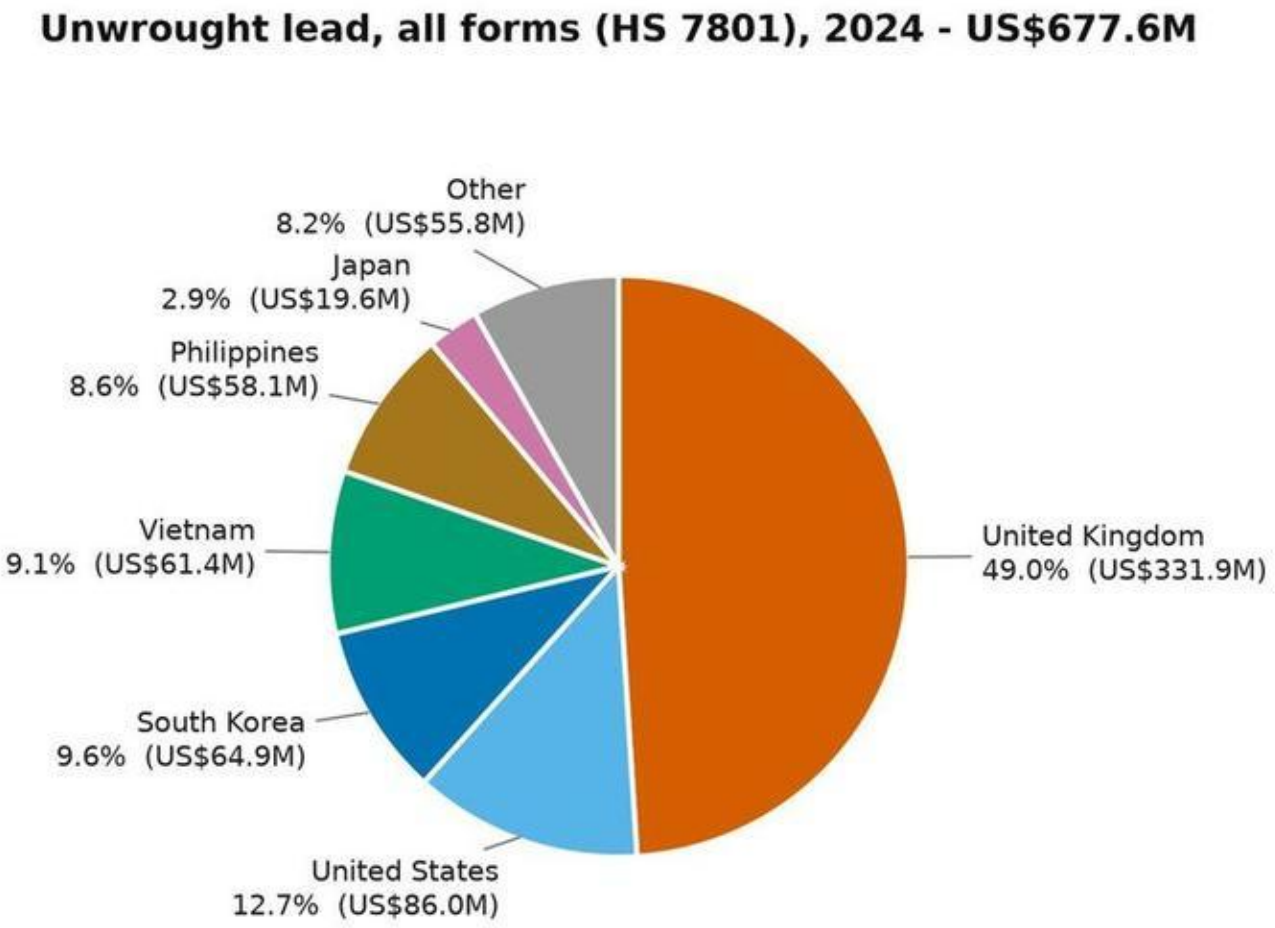


Figure 2. Australian exports of unwrought lead, all forms (HS 7801) by destination, 2024. Data: UN Comtrade, Australia-reported

Combining both categories, South Korea and the United Kingdom sit almost level as Australia's top two lead destinations, together taking more than half of everything Australia ships.

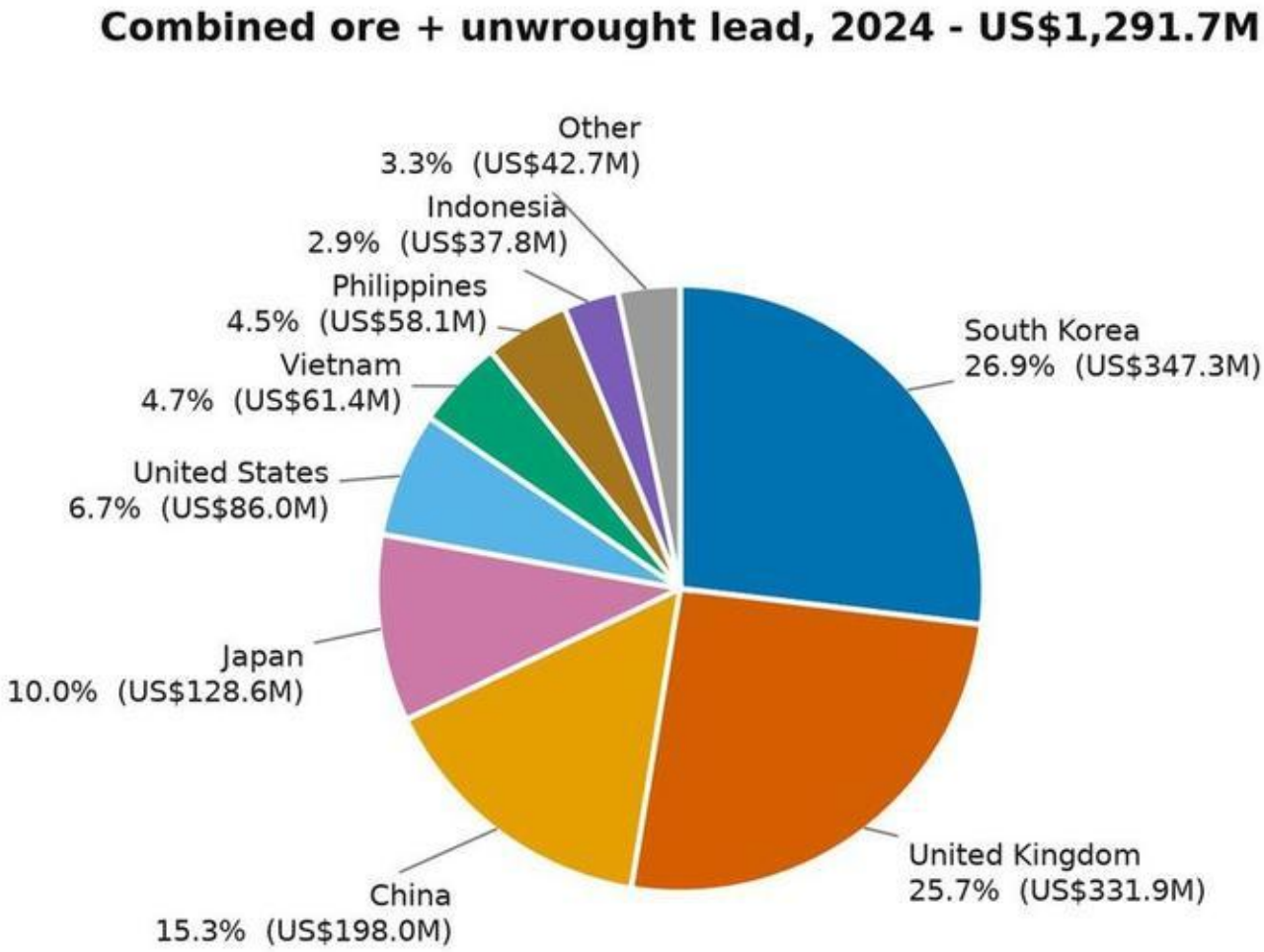


Figure 3. Combined Australian lead exports (HS 2607 plus HS 7801) by destination, 2024. Data: UN Comtrade, Australia-reported

The full 2024 figures, every destination

All values are US$ million, Australia-reported, calendar year 2024 (United Nations Statistics Division 2026). A zero means no recorded trade.

Destination	Ores & concentrates US$M	%	Unwrought lead US$M	%	Combined US$M	%
South Korea	282.35	46.0	64.94	9.6	347.30	26.9
United	0	0.0	331.93	49.0	331.93	25.7

Destination	Ores & concentrates US$M	%	Unwrought lead US$M	%	Combined US$M	%
Kingdom						
China	190.11	31.0	7.86	1.2	197.97	15.3
Japan	109.00	17.8	19.61	2.9	128.62	10.0
United States	0	0.0	85.98	12.7	85.98	6.7
Vietnam	0	0.0	61.35	9.1	61.35	4.7
Philippines	0	0.0	58.07	8.6	58.07	4.5
Indonesia	32.45	5.3	5.35	0.8	37.80	2.9
Singapore	0	0.0	17.24	2.5	17.24	1.3
Pakistan	0	0.0	8.15	1.2	8.15	0.6
Thailand	0	0.0	6.94	1.0	6.94	0.5
Taiwan	0	0.0	4.76	0.7	4.76	0.4
Mexico	0	0.0	2.63	0.4	2.63	0.2
New Zealand	0	0.0	1.52	0.2	1.52	0.1
India	0.13	0.0	0.12	0.0	0.25	0.0
Greece	0	0.0	0.44	0.1	0.44	0.0
Brazil	0	0.0	0.32	0.0	0.32	0.0
Malaysia	0	0.0	0.25	0.0	0.25	0.0
Fiji	0	0.0	0.14	0.0	0.14	0.0
Hong Kong	0	0.0	0.01	0.0	0.01	0.0
Egypt	0	0.0	0.01	0.0	0.01	0.0
Cocos (Keeling) Islands	0	0.0	0.01	0.0	0.01	0.0
World total	**614.05**	**100**	**677.63**	**100**	**1,291.69**	**100**

The United Kingdom: the destination the summary data hides

Between 2019 and 2024 Australia shipped between US$262 million and US$454 million of unwrought lead to the United Kingdom every year (111,657 tonnes in 2024), making the UK Australia's single largest unwrought-lead destination in both 2023 and 2024 (United Nations Statistics Division 2026). Yet the UK does not appear at all in the widely-quoted "refined lead" statistics, because those cover only HS 780110 and the UK trade is classified as HS 780199 lead bullion. A reader relying on the refined-lead figures alone would wrongly conclude that the United States is the top destination for Australian lead metal.

The UK connection matters for aviation. Innospec Inc., a United States company listed on NASDAQ (IOSP), states in its 2025 annual report that it believes it remains "the world's only producer of tetra ethyl lead for use in aviation gasoline", and its accounts tie tetraethyl lead (TEL) production to its site at Ellesmere Port in the UK (Innospec Inc. 2026). TEL is the additive that still makes leaded aviation gasoline (AvGas 100LL) leaded, the fuel the United States Federal Aviation Administration's Eliminate Aviation Gasoline Lead Emissions (EAGLE) programme aims to phase out by the end of 2030 (Federal Aviation Administration 2026). Trade data cannot show whether any particular tonne of Australian bullion ends up in Innospec's TEL plant; what it does show is that Australia is pouring over 100,000 tonnes of lead a year into the UK, the home of the world's last AvGas TEL factory.

The trade data does not name the consignee, but Glencore does. Britannia Refined Metals (BRM), on the Thames at Northfleet in Kent, is a wholly owned Glencore subsidiary and the largest primary lead refinery in Europe, and Glencore's own corporate pages state that its Mount Isa Mines operation in Queensland "also produces lead/silver bullion refined at Britannia Refined Metals in the UK" (Glencore n.d.). In sworn evidence to a UK planning inquiry in April 2025, BRM's own engineer spelled the chain out: the mines and smelter are at Mount Isa, the refinery at Northfleet; the crude lead is dispatched from Australia in 50,000-60,000 tonne vessels, about six deliveries a year; BRM receives 140,000 to 160,000 tonnes of crude lead per annum; and the refinery was established in 1930 for precisely this purpose, when Mount Isa's lead was first shipped to the UK for refining (Odendaal 2025). Glencore's 2025 closure of the Mount Isa copper operations did not touch the lead smelter, which continues to cast 99.6% pure lead bullion for export (Glencore Australia n.d.).

The LEAD Group documented the final link fifteen years ago. In June 2011, LEAD Action News traced the supply chain for the lead in leaded petrol, from Mount Isa, to BRM, and on: "Britannia Refined Metals Ltd supplies the lead to Innospec in the United Kingdom", then the world's only manufacturer of TEL today (Roberts and O'Brien 2011a), as Innospec still believes itself to be for AvGas. The companion editorial named, person by person, the leaders who could break that chain, from the Xstrata chief executive whose Mount Isa mine supplied the lead, to the prime ministers and presidents who could have stopped the flow of Australian lead into the lead additive for leaded petrol and of leaded petrol into the last remaining countries still selling leaded petrol (Roberts and O'Brien 2011b). None of them did. Since 1994 when the last TEL-maker in North America closed down, the UK TEL-maker has, by their own claim, made all the TEL for both leaded petrol and leaded AvGas. In 2021, the UN Partnership for Clean Fuels and Vehicles, of which The LEAD Group was a partner, finally announced the elimination of leaded petrol globally for road vehicles. But the TEL kept being made for AvGas. Now in 2026, the bullion still sails from Townsville to the Thames, the refinery that was built for it still refines the lead, and the TEL factory at Ellesmere Port still has no rival. Put plainly: it is very likely Australian lead in all the leaded AvGas in all the world, just as it was when The LEAD Group first said so about leaded MoGas (gasoline/petrol for motor vehicles) in 2011.

Claude AI's note on sources used by some AI generated overviews

The figures in this article are Australia-reported data from the United Nations Comtrade database for calendar year 2024, in which every partner country is listed and the partner values sum exactly to the world totals. Summary statistics circulating online (including AI-generated overviews citing the Observatory of Economic Complexity) draw on the OEC's BACI dataset, which reconciles exporter- and importer-reported flows and, crucially, is often quoted for refined lead (HS 780110) only, which omits the UK bullion trade entirely (The Observatory of Economic Complexity 2026).

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