Uranium Panel Heading to Mining Ground Zero

STEVE SZKOTAK,Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — A state panel amid a wide-ranging examination of the prospect of uranium mining in Virginia is headed to the Southside county, where a proposal to mine one of the world's largest deposits of the radioactive ore has ignited a fierce environmental debate.

The Uranium Working Group will outline its progress to date and hear from the public during a meeting Monday in Chatham, located in Pittsylvania County.

The group's findings, to be delivered later this year, will guide the General Assembly debate expected in 2013 over whether to end the state's 30-year ban on uranium mining. Members of the working group have said they will not recommend a course of action.

"We've taken on a large job, a very important job, one that the governor and the agencies feel is critical," said Maureen Matsen, Gov. Bob McDonnell's energy adviser and spokeswoman for the group. "It's critical that our decision-makers have the information they need to make this important decision for the commonwealth."

The working group includes representatives from the Department of Health; the Department of Mines, Minerals and Energy; and the Department of Environmental Quality. Dozens of state workers are also involved, as well as a consultant group costing more than $500,000.

Created in January by the governor, the group's charge includes 18 tasks related to uranium mining and milling. Those tasks include creating drafts of laws and regulations for mining and milling.

Milling involves the separating the radioactive ore from rock, which creates huge amounts of radioactive waste called tailings. The waste would be held in containment structures, or cells.

Opponents have pointed to these cells as among the most worrisome environmentally. They fear storms or torrential rains could breach the containments and scatter radioactive waste on farmland and in waters that supply public drinking water to areas as far away as Virginia Beach, the state's largest city.

The resort city reaffirmed its opposition to mining this month, saying that "while the probability of a major tailings release is small, the adverse consequences of such a release would be enormous and unacceptable."

Virginia Uranium Inc., which has proposed tapping the 119-million-pound uranium deposit in Pittsylvania County, has said the uranium can be safely mined and milled and its waste securely stored. The company has produced studies that say the

mining operation would create hundreds of jobs and hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues in a region of the state sorely in need of an economic boost.

The Coles Hill site is believed to be the largest known U.S. deposit of uranium and among the top 10 in the world, according to geologists and industry sources. It would be used to fuel nuclear power plants.

Opposing sides in the uranium debate have been intractable, and a series of studies on the issue have only provided each side with ammunition.

A National Academy of Sciences study, for instance, has been embraced by Virginia Uranium as offering evidence that by using best industry practices uranium mining can be conducted with minimal environmental impacts. But opponents have also cited the study to make the case against mining.

The academy study, delivered to the state in December, concludes Virginia faces steep hurdles to ensure the safety of uranium workers and residents but takes no position on whether the ban should be lifted.

Some critics have questioned the very existence of McDonnell's study group following the academy's report. They maintain its consulting group has too many ties to mining and uranium.

"With the water supply of 1 million citizens at risk downstream of this proposed mine, why is the governor wasting $500,000 on a questionable consulting firm to study the issue again?" asked Glen Besa, director of the Sierra Club's Virginia chapter, which is encouraging residents to attend Monday's meeting.

Wright Environmental Services Inc., the consulting group, has disagreed with the criticism and says its experts also reflect regulatory viewpoints.

Others have said the governor's working group is just a pretense to assemble a regulatory framework that the legislature can use as a template if it lifts the ban, which Matsen also denied.

Matsen said the group's presentation Monday at Chatham High School will likely focus on aspects that members have addressed to this point, such as a framework for a draft mining statute.

"And we certainly want to hear any comments, questions and information that folks have related to those topics," she said.

"I'm not sure we'll be prepared to respond to questions on other topics," Matsen said, adding that written comments submitted to the working group's online site are "tremendously helpful."

Those comments are streaming in and have just begun to be posted.

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Online:

Virginia Uranium Group: http://www.uwg.vi.virginia.gov/ *[2]*

Keep the Ban: http://keeptheban.org/ *[3]*

Virginia Uranium Inc.: http://www.virginiauranium.com/ *[4]*

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