

Business Leaders Surveyed on Uranium

STEVE SZKOTAK, Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — A narrow majority of 652 business leaders from across Virginia opposes ending the state's decades-old moratorium on uranium mining, but their concerns could be allayed if they learned more about how the radioactive ore is mined and what protections would be in place, a survey released Tuesday said.

The report was the final issued by Gov. Bob McDonnell's Uranium Working Group, which in late November laid out the regulatory structure that would be required if Virginia allowed a mining company to tap uranium deposit in Pittsylvania County that is the largest in the U.S. The issue is expected to be fiercely debated in the General Assembly this session.

The report, the latest of many examining uranium mining, sampled business attitudes about the issue in surveys conducted in November and December. Its primary message: while many business leaders were aware of the uranium deposit, few had a clear understanding how the ore would be extracted and processed for use in nuclear power reactors.

"The need for clear, unbiased and accessible information provided a common thread through all the studies included in this report," wrote the authors, ORI, a market research firm in Herndon.

Of the business leaders surveyed, about 60 percent were aware of the 119-million-pound uranium deposit in Southside Virginia and the debate over whether a 1982 moratorium should be lifted. The business leaders, however, have a low to moderate trust in the information available on perhaps the most important environmental issue in the state.

"Respondents reported that although they have concerns about uranium mining, those concerns would decrease if they were to learn more about the processes and protections that are associated with the mining of uranium," the report said.

Virginia Uranium Inc., based in Chatham, has proposed extracting the ore, which it values at \$7 billion. The company has cast the mining as an economic plus for a region that could use the hundreds of jobs and tax revenues the mine would create. It has also stressed energy independence, with more than 90 percent of the nation's uranium coming from foreign sources.

The company has said the mining can be done safely, using the most modern industry practices. Opponents counter the environmental risks are not worth the economic benefits.

Just slightly more than 50 percent of the business leaders surveyed said they do not support ending the ban, while 39 percent want it to end. About 10 percent didn't

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have an opinion. About two-thirds of the businesses surveyed have fewer than 10 employees.

Among the survey's other findings:

— The top concern involved mining's possible negative impacts on children, followed by worries about the environment, workers and residents, as well as its impact on housing values in Southside.

— Local business leaders were primarily concerned about public water supplies and agriculture.

— Responses were mixed on mining's impact on local economic growth, with most concluding that it would have a negative effect on business revenue rather than positive.

Patrick Wales, project manager for Virginia Uranium, said the survey's conclusion on the "level of awareness" about uranium mining is understandable. Full-scale uranium mining has never occurred on the East Coast.

"That's to be expected with any new industry and that's why as we move forward it will be important to specifically address people's concerns and assure them of our commitment to safety and protecting the environment," he said in a statement.

Wales also noted that most business leaders did not view uranium mining as a "stigma."

Andrew Lester of the Roanoke River Basin Authority, which opposes uranium mining, said the report appears to downplay concerns raised by a National Academy of Sciences study by "suggesting that those who are concerned must not be educated enough on this issue."

The NAS study concluded Virginia would have to overcome "steep hurdles" to ensure that uranium mining and processing could be conducted safely. It did not offer a recommendation on the moratorium.

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Online: ORI report:

www.governor.virginia.gov/utility/docs/1-15-2013%20Final%20Report%20for%20the%20Business%20Attitude%20Survey%20Regarding%20Uranium%20Mining%20In%20Pittsylvania%20County%20VA.pdf [2]

Virginia Uranium Inc.: www.virginiauranium.com [3]

Keep the Ban: <http://keeptheban.org/> [4]

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[3] <http://www.virginiauranium.com/>

[4] <http://keeptheban.org/>