

Proposed East Coast Uranium Mine Divides VA

STEVE SZKOTAK, Associated Press

CHATHAM, Va. (AP) — The rolling fields of Coles Hill were once full of tobacco. Along with furniture and textiles, the leaf sustained farmers, blue collar workers and families in this area of Virginia known as Southside.

All three industries are in decline now, and the region typically leads the state in unemployment. But something beneath the fields — something you can't see — could be Southside's salvation.

Uranium — enough to power every nuclear power plant in the U.S. for 2 1/2 years — lies under these fields where dozens of black-and-white Angus-Hereford beef cattle were grazing on a gray, drizzly winter day.

Geologist Patrick M. Wales walked the field's fence line with a Geiger counter to illustrate what hundreds of jobs sound like. He stooped to clear layers of wet leaves from a culvert, then cradled the detector in the middle of the trough he made. The instrument that had rhythmically clicked like a cicada seconds before now emitted a steady, piercing shriek.

The deposit runs deep, about 1,500 feet. "This is really one of the areas where it just happens to pop up to the surface," Wales said.

The ore detected by the Geiger counter is the tip of an iceberg that is the largest known uranium deposit in the United States and among the largest in the world.

Now a company's bid to mine the 119 million pounds of the radioactive ore has churned up the political landscape in Virginia. Virginia's General Assembly is taking up the fiercely debated issue this session and it's a coin flip whether it will clear the way for the state to become the first on the East Coast to mine uranium.

Most uranium mining in the U.S. has occurred in the arid West. Virginia is prone to tropical tempests — some of historic proportions — and opponents fear a catastrophic storm could create an environmental nightmare if the mining and processing of the ore was allowed. Drenching rains and winds could carry radioactive waste to local waters that are used for drinking supplies in the state's largest city, Virginia Beach, and others in southeastern Virginia, they argue.

"We're looking at an extraordinary high-stakes gamble and it's not a gamble the state of Virginia should take," said Cale Jaffe, a leading voice against mining and director of the Charlottesville office of the Southern Environmental Law Center.

It's not the mining that stirs the most concern, but the so-called milling — the separation of the ore from hard rock.

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As rock and uranium are mined, they are crushed and then leached through a chemical process to extract the ore. Besides yellowcake, the fuel for nuclear power plants, the process creates huge amounts of waste called tailings. The tailings must be stored for up to 1,000 years. Virginia Uranium, the company seeking the right to mine, has committed to storing the waste in below-ground containment cells that it says would minimize the risk of the radioactive waste being released to local wells or public drinking sources.

Opponents have not been appeased.

They include the Virginia Farm Bureau Federation, the state's largest farm lobby and traditionally pro-business; the NAACP; church groups; municipal organizations; water-protection groups; and every environmental organization of note in the state.

Delegate Donald Merricks, a Republican whose district includes Pittsylvania County, says the creation of mining jobs got his interest but not his support.

It's the milling that worries Merricks, and it's a tough call as he ticks off the jobs and industries that have withered through the years. He's quick to add, however, that he's heard from people who have decided against locating in his district because of the fear of uranium mining.

For him, it comes down to this: "How do you define safe?"

"I know you cannot 100 percent guarantee anything to be safe, but I think you need to have some reasonable assurances that the process is not going to contaminate the environment," he said. "Personally, I made the decision that I don't think it's worth the risk for the milling.

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The story of uranium in Virginia parallels the nation's uneasy history with nuclear power.

The uranium deposit in Pittsylvania County was first detected in the 1950s but interest in mining it didn't develop until nuclear power emerged as a source of clean energy in the 1970s. The accident at Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island, then the Chernobyl nuclear accident in Ukraine, changed that. As uranium prices plummeted, interest in tapping the Southside Virginia deposit waned and the Legislature enacted a moratorium on mining the ore in the 1980s. It remains in place to this day.

The uranium is located in two locations on Coles Hill, a 3,500-acre property in Pittsylvania County, about 20 miles from the North Carolina border. Coles Hill derives its name from the family whose ties to this land dates back more than two centuries and six generations. Its members are now famously known for the company they captain, Virginia Uranium.

The company was created a half-dozen years ago when the nation appeared poised for a nuclear power renaissance. That hasn't happened and an application to build a

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nuclear power plant hadn't been submitted for 30 years until February 2012. The company notes that more than 90 percent of the nation's 65 nuclear power plants get their fuel from foreign sources — Canada, Australia, Kazakhstan — and mining the Virginia deposit would strengthen the nation's energy independence.

Virginia Uranium, which has ties to Canadian mining interests, has pushed hard to have the decades-old moratorium end so it can begin the long process of securing environmental reviews and getting permits in place. It estimates mining wouldn't occur for another five to eight years.

The payoff is big: The company puts the value of the uranium at \$7 billion. It would create about 300-350 high-paying jobs through the 35-year life of the mine and, according to some studies, pump hundreds of millions of dollars into the local economy and add hundreds of other jobs related to the activity created by the mining.

But environmental issues are the sticking point.

The prospect of uranium mining in Virginia has spawned an avalanche of studies, none of which are definitive. A yearlong analysis by a National Academy of Sciences panel is considered the gold standard among all the others, and supporters and critics of mining draw generously from its final report to argue their competing points.

Yes, it concludes, mining and milling in the West in the past has resulted in arsenic and uranium in local water supplies, but modern mining practices have the potential to reduce those risks.

Modern containment cells are designed to keep the waste out of water, but monitoring of existing waste sites to assess long-term impacts has not been done over the generations that would be required in Virginia, the authors state.

Supporters of mining say popular images of nuclear power and the crises at Chernobyl and most recently Fukushima in Japan have created a climate of fear involving anything radioactive, including uranium.

"It's that enduring image of the mushroom cloud," said Andrea Jennetta, who publishes Fuel Cycle Weekly, which is aimed at uranium producers, buyers and government agencies. "People seem to be unable to separate that from any sort of peaceful or positive use."

Still others say to reject mining is contrary to the American can-do spirit. Lillian Gillespie, the former mayor of Pittsylvania County's largest town, Hurt, is of that school. She left her native state of West Virginia to pursue a higher paying job with a furniture manufacturer.

"We've sent men to the moon and brought them back," she said. "I just believe we as a nation, as a state and a county can do something like this."

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Wales, the public face of Virginia Uranium and project manager for the company, is a native of nearby Danville and describes the issue as "personal and moral." The Coles family, he notes, would continue to live on the property if mining was allowed.

"We drink the water. Our children play in these fields," Wales said. "We have the highest stake as well in ensuring that this is done in an environmentally friendly way."

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Legislation has been submitted in the House of Delegates and the Senate to establish regulations for uranium mining, which would in effect end the 1982 moratorium and allow Virginia Uranium to move forward to tap the deposit.

While many expect a close vote, few are willingly to publicly venture a guess on the outcome. That's because the issue defies party politics, geography and traditional alliances. Public sentiment provides little guidance to lawmakers; statewide polling shows residents divided down the middle.

Gov. Bob McDonnell, who has been mentioned as a possible Republican presidential candidate in 2016 and has made energy development a cornerstone of his administration, has yet to take a position or say whether he will. But his lieutenant governor, fellow Republican Bruce Bolling, has stated he's opposed to mining. His position could be critical because he casts the deciding vote in the Senate when a tie vote occurs, and the Senate appears to be closely divided on uranium.

Ultimately, the decision could rest with the Pittsylvania County Board of Supervisors, which would have to change Cole Hill's agricultural zoning. Last Wednesday, the board voted 5-1 for a nonbinding resolution supporting the moratorium on uranium mining.

Virginia Uranium has made it clear it will be back in 2014 if its heavily financed lobbying effort this session falls short. "We've got a \$7 billion project," Wales said at a recent forum on uranium mining. "Do you really think we're going to give up and walk away?"

The same holds true for the opponents, who have hinted at litigation if mining is approved. Opposition is also stirring in North Carolina, which has an interest in mutually shared water resources across the state lines.

"We do share the waterway and we live downstream from this issue," said Mike Pucci, a former pharmaceutical executive who has a home on the shore of Lake Gaston. He said Virginia Uranium should be mindful of a future class action if mining moves ahead.

"This is not a threat. This is just reality," he said.

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Virginia Uranium Inc.: <http://www.virginiauranium.com/> [2]

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