Uranium Mining Proposal Abandoned

STEVE SZKOTAK,Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — A proposal to mine uranium in Virginia was abruptly abandoned Thursday in the Legislature, and supporters scrambled to appeal directly to the governor to salvage what would be the first full-scale mining operation of the radioactive ore on the East Coast.

Unable to deliver the votes in the General Assembly, Sen. John Watkins withdrew his legislation to establish state regulations for uranium mining in Southside Virginia, a rural area along the North Carolina state line and home to the largest known deposit of the radioactive ore in the U.S.

Watkins instead asked fellow Republican Gov. Bob McDonnell to use his administrative powers to have state agencies draw up the rules. McDonnell has not taken a position on the divisive issue and his spokesman J. Tucker Martin said the governor was reviewing the request.

Meanwhile, opponents of uranium mining, many of whom had traveled to Richmond for a hearing on the legislation, cheered when Watkins announced his decision.

"This is a resounding — a resounding — victory," said Cale Jaffe of the Southern Environmental Law Center.

He credited broad opposition to the proposal, which was pitched by the mining company as a job creator in a hard-hit section of the state.

"This is not just environmentalists," Jaffe said. "This is small business owners in Southside, it's farmers, it's parents of small children, it's community leaders, it's physicians — all these disparate voices coming together."

The proposal was pushed by Virginia Uranium Inc., a company run by the owners of the so-called Coles Hill deposit, where an estimated 119 million pounds of the ore is located in an area of the state called Southside.

The company immediately embraced Watkins' request to the governor and a spokesman said the approach would be thorough and transparent.

"Some policymakers have suggested that unanswered questions remain," said spokesman Patrick Wales. "Sen. Watkins' suggested course of action would ensure that they have the benefit of all possible information on this issue before casting a vote on lifting the moratorium."

The General Assembly would still have to vote to accept the regulations, probably in 2014.

Uranium mining has been done almost exclusively in the arid West and critics said Virginia's exposure to tropical storms and torrential rains made it a bad choice to mine the ore.

They have said they're primarily concerned about the milling — the separation of ore from rock. It creates vast amounts of waste that must be stored for generations.

Opponents fear a breach of containment cells holding the waste would contaminate public drinking water supplies for localities as far away as Virginia Beach, nearly 200 miles from the proposed mine. The tourist city, Virginia's largest, had taken a public stand against mining.

Environmentalists were joined in their opposition by local grass-root organizers, Virginia's largest farm lobby, the state's medical society, municipal and church groups, the NAACP and others.

The company promised the creation of 350 jobs over the 35-year life of the mine but the economics of the mine could not outweigh what critics called the "stigma" of mining the fuel for nuclear reactors.

"It's a stigma, that cloud hanging over the region that will detract economic development from the region as long as it's there," said Sen. Frank Ruff, a Republican whose district is in Southside Virginia. "We need to put it to rest."

Watkins' legislation would have effectively ended the state's 31-year prohibition on the mining of uranium. The moratorium was put in place when interest was just stirring in the deposit but quickly waned after the accident at Three Mile Island.

Virginia Uranium revived interest in mining the deposit about a half dozen years ago when the U.S. nuclear power industry seemed on the cusp of a renaissance. The Coles Hill deposit could power the country's nuclear power plants for 2 ½ years. The U.S. gets 90 percent of its yellowcake — the reactor fuel — from places like Canada and Australia.

Uranium mining was the subject of a raft of studies, including one by a National Academy of Sciences panel. It concluded the state would be challenged to create regulations to ensure safe mining and milling. None of the studies offered absolute assurances that mining and milling can be done risk-free.

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Online:

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

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

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