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Op/Ed

Uranium Mining

It's time to end the ban

By DELEGATE LEE WARE

For the past two years it has been my privilege to chair the Coal and Energy Commission's Uranium Study subcommittee. Today we conclude our deliberations on the proposal brought before us by Virginia Uranium Inc., which hopes to extract the large deposit of uranium ore on the Coles Hill property near Gretna in Pittsylvania County.

My first response to the conclusion of our work must be to thank the subcommittee members who have travelled far, sat long, listened carefully and read much as we have requested and received a vast amount of information and also public comment. It pleases me to be able to report that we have discharged our responsibility with diligence, thoroughness, open-mindedness and civility.

The subcommittee commissioned two studies. One, which could be characterized as "quantitative," reviewed the technical issues raised by the Virginia Uranium proposal, and was conducted by the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). The other, conducted by the private firm of Chmura Associates of Richmond, evaluated the qualitative questions of the probable social and economic consequences in the immediate area of Coles Hill were uranium mining there to be permitted.

The NAS study identified regulatory "hurdles" that would need to be surmounted were the General Assembly to lift the "moratorium" on uranium mining that has been in place – virtually by default – since 1982. Accordingly, to inform us whether

I have come to the conclusion that the deposit at Coles Hill can be mined safely.

these hurdles could be surmounted, the subcommittee last January asked Gov. Bob McDonnell to have the state agencies of the executive branch of our government identify the regulations required to resolve the technical and environmental concerns identified by the NAS.

The Governor's Work Study Group dutifully responded with months of research and a series of public hearings. The Study Group's report came to us last month, and on Dec. 11 the Uranium Study subcommittee held a public hearing in Chatham for its formal presentation to citizens of the region surrounding Coles Hill.

In keeping with my responsibilities as subcommittee chairman, I reached no conclusions on the issue until all of the aforementioned reports were presented. If anything, my own instincts, and also the sentimental expression of my conservative convictions, have identified me as an agnostic on the issue. "Change" for the sake of change is a matter to which I am naturally indisposed.

Further, I would prefer that the great Southside of Virginia – in which I make my home – were still given primarily to tobacco, textiles and woodworking. The chemical, engineering and technical dimensions of nuclear-energy generation

are not high among my interests. But, then, it was possible for me as a much younger man to work on my own car. The changes in both engines and electronics over recent decades now far outstrip my modest capabilities with spark plugs and motor oil.

We have heard a lot over recent months about the "stigma" that would attach itself to the Southside were uranium mining to be permitted in Pittsylvania. Though a quality that is subjective and therefore impossible to quantify, this concern with "stigma" has been embraced by some opponents, including, I regret to see, our own lieutenant governor.

Others, including a prominent opponent, have referred to an "irrational fear" of the unknown, that is, to whether the residue – the tailings – of a uranium-mining operation could be safely sequestered for decades, perhaps even centuries, to come.

Still others have declared their opposition to uranium mining – long before the present studies were concluded – on an appeal to "the stewardship of creation."

These are the principal concerns with which the legislature must wrestle in deciding this issue, so allow me to conclude by offering my own response to their thrusts.

Regarding the inevitably emotional element involved in the question, I believe that it was been well remarked by our forebears that "we have nothing to fear but fear itself." The proper response to fear, as to any emotion, is to bring to bear upon it the faculties of reason and will, so that great questions are decided by the mind and not by the motion of the passions.

I believe the regulation of uranium mining can be accomplished while ensuring the long-term security of the people of Virginia and also the long-term husbandry of the natural environment of the Southside.

In this regard I take inspiration from the words ascribed to St. Thomas More by Robert Bolt in his great play "A Man for All Seasons":

"God made the angels to show Him splendor – as He made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But Man He made to serve Him wittily, in the tangle of His mind!"

I am reminded, too, that we have been given talents – reason among the foremost among them – and that God in creation has given us, too, resources that we can explore, extract and employ for the co-creation of the common good.

Which brings me to the opposition to uranium mining expressed by my colleagues in the legislature – each of whom I count as a political friend – from the Southside closest to Coles Hill.

I respect their decision. I understand their concerns. Indeed, I share their concerns. I have simply come to the alternative conclusion that the deposit at Coles Hill can be mined safely and that the imperatives of history require us to muster the political will to see that both the mining and the subsequent storage of mining residue are well and safely achieved.

Accordingly, I will be supporting the legislation offered by Sen. John Watkins – like me, a citizen of Powhatan – because I believe the regulation of uranium mining can be accomplished while ensuring the long-term security of the people of Virginia and also the long-term husbandry of the natural environment of the Southside, and of the entire region, including the water

resources upon which the residents of Hampton Roads depend.

If need be, I will offer amendments requiring redundancies of the regulations and procedures necessary to safely contain, in perpetuity, the tailings that will result from the operation.

Without question, it has been the question of safe storage of these tailings that has generated the most concern about – and also opposition to – the Virginia Uranium proposal. On this crucial question, I am persuaded by the remarks to me by an internationally renowned engineer with responsibilities for overseeing both the mining of uranium ore and the storage of tailings:

"It is inconceivable to me that Americans could think that they can't safely do this."

The leading spokesman of the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission was similarly convincing.

It is important to emphasize that lifting the moratorium would merely inaugurate a long and arduous process whereby regulations would be promulgated to ensure the safe mining, milling and, in future years, the reclamation of the affected land and the perpetual storage of tailings.

This process, to be conducted by agencies of the governor and also of the federal government, would include continual engagement with the public and a response to every public concern. The costs associated with this process would be recouped from the mining operation.

We live in a commonwealth. As legislators, our concerns must embrace the larger good of the whole of Virginia. For instance, I would not wish to live in the suburbs of Northern Virginia. But the dynamism of Northern Virginia contributes massively to the well-being of the most remote rural corner of the commonwealth. Accordingly, we must take heed when Northern Virginians confront – for example – transportation needs that exceed those of our own communities.

We live, too, in a vast country whose well-being, whose very security, can hinge on the availability of natural resources from a remote desert on the Arabian Peninsula. And the hard reality is that a far-distant country,

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China, has for years been accumulating – from Africa, and from South America – materiel and minerals, including uranium ore, for which our own economy and our own security have pressing need.

Fortunately, the proponents of uranium mining are themselves residents of the very community, indeed, of the very property, on which the mining and milling of this remarkable ore would take place. The Coles family and their associates have presented a thoughtful, thorough and honorable proposal.

Finally, I am reminded that all of us already benefit from the application of nuclear energies made possibly by uranium. Radiation therapy takes place in virtually all of our hospitals. Nuclear vessels of the United States Navy ply our waters and are posted at our ports. Dominion operates nuclear power-generating plants in Louisa and Surry counties. Lynchburg, within 30 miles of the Coles Hill property, is home to some of the most sophisticated nuclear-materials processing facilities in the world.

So, the Uranium Study Subcommittee has completed its work. I recommend now that the legislature respond with reason, imagination and, also, with due regard to opposing views, with civility in adjudicating the proposal that the state proceed in promulgating regulations for the mining and milling of uranium ore at Coles Hill. I have every expectation that our governor will soon be making the same recommendation.

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