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Virginia panel OKs uranium mining study

By MICHAEL FELBERBAUM

A Virginia coal and energy panel on Thursday approved the framework of a scientific study on proposed uranium mining in the state, saying they want to make safety their top priority.

A subcommittee of the Virginia Commission on Coal and Energy amended a list of recommendations from the National Academy of Sciences on what to include in the study. It would range from market trends to technical practices to health risks, but would not take a position for or against the mining.

Members heard a series of public comments at the more than two-hour meeting before amending the study's scope. Among the major revisions: putting assessment of health risks to workers and the public at the top of the list.

Environmentalists and residents who live close to the site near the Virginia-North

Carolina state line worry about hazards to human health and the environment from mining the radioactive material.

"I think that what we heard here was a real strong desire to make it clear that safety is our top priority in this," said Del. Kristen Amundson of Fairfax, a member of the panel charged with commissioning an independent study.

Before uranium could be mined in Virginia, the General Assembly would have to lift a ban that has been in place since 1982. The proposed independent study could take 1 1/2 years, then the General Assembly would decide whether to approve the mining. The legislature last year refused to even study the idea.

The study, a first step to lifting that ban, had been requested by Virginia Uranium Inc., which wants to mine a 119 million-pound Pittsylvania County deposit

beneath 3,000 acres near the North Carolina border in Southside Virginia. It is believed to be the largest deposit in the nation, with a value estimated anywhere from \$7 billion to \$10 billion.

The study, designed to cover all aspects of the impact on uranium mining in Virginia, also will examine ecosystem issues, problems related to air and water pollution, and state and federal regulatory issues.

"I think this study will help me as an individual to arrive at what I think might be the right decision," said Sen. Phillip Puckett of Russell County. "All on this subcommittee want to do the right thing here. I'm telling you personally I don't think I have the knowledge and information I need to make that decision today."
