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DANVILLE VIRGINIA

Nuclear energy making a comeback?

BY CATHERINE AMOS

Although there are strong opinions on both sides about mining the 119-million-pound uranium ore deposit at Coles Hill in Pittsylvania County, nuclear power proponents are hailing recent support for the energy industry as a “nuclear renaissance.”

Earlier this week, the National Academy of Science’s National Research Council signed a contract with Virginia Tech’s Center for Coal and Energy Research to move forward with a study of the safety of mining uranium — the fuel for nuclear power plants — in Virginia. Also this week, President Barack Obama supported \$8.3 billion in loan guarantees to build two nuclear power plants in Georgia.

And in November, Sen. Jim Webb co-sponsored bipartisan legislation with Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., to invest \$20 billion over the next 10 to 20 years to expand nuclear energy and other clean energy technology in the United States — doubling domestic nuclear power by 2030 and extending the life of the current fleet of 104 nuclear reactors by 20 years.

“I think that there’s tremendous potential in Virginia,” said Patrick Wales, spokesman and geologist for Virginia Uranium Inc., which seeks to mine and mill the deposit near Chatham. “We’re one of the leading states for nuclear technology in the nation right now. This certainly could enhance that position as well as reduce our dependence on carbon-based forms of electricity generation.”

According to a news release, the Alexander-Webb bill SB 2776 would fund: a series of loan guarantees, nuclear education and work force training assistance, research into nuclear lifetime extension and the development of solar power, biofuels and alternative power technologies — partly through funding five “Mini-Manhattan Projects.”

The legislation, the release stated, aims to address climate change by reducing carbon dioxide emissions, provide for growing domestic energy needs and strengthen the nation’s work force with educational opportunities and high-paying jobs.

NUCLEAR ENERGY IN VIRGINIA

- Virginia has two nuclear power plants, with two reactors each, that provide about one third of the state’s electricity
- In 2008, Virginia ranked 14th in nuclear capacity and 14th in nuclear generation
- Dominion Power operates the state’s two nuclear plants: North Anna Power Station in Louisa County and Surry Power Station in Surry County
- There are also two fuel processing plants in Lynchburg: Areva, Inc. and The Babcock & Wilcox Co.
- Information from U.S. Energy Information Administration

Jessica Smith, director of communications for Webb, said Virginia was “arguably the best state for the expansion of nuclear research and development” because of the presence of Lynchburg’s two nuclear manufacturers, Areva, Inc. and The Babcock & Wilcox Co. About 30 percent of Virginia’s energy is nuclear power, compared to less than 20 percent nationally, Smith said.

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The investment in mini-Manhattan projects for clean energy research and development supports the development of small reactors — “a big boost” for companies such as Babcock & Wilcox and Areva, Smith said.

Both Babcock & Wilcox and Areva sent strong letters of support to Webb following the announcement of the legislation. Michael Rencheck, CEO of Areva, wrote that supporting additional reactors in the United States would bring more than 4,000 jobs — per reactor — during construction and 400-700 long-term careers.

“The nuclear work force provisions are equally important,” Rencheck wrote, “ensuring a steady supply of well-educated engineers, operators and craftsmen to fill the jobs that will launch the pending nuclear renaissance.”

With all this potential expansion of the nuclear industry on the horizon,

Wales argues that only increases the need to develop domestic resources, such as the local uranium deposit, if legislators want to reduce the dependence on foreign fuel.

“There’s a misconception that building our new nuclear plants will decrease our dependence on foreign energy sources,” Wales said. “If we do build new plants, which I think everyone agrees is necessary, and do not develop our own resources, it will exacerbate our dependence on foreign fuel.

“(Coles Hill is) the largest undeveloped deposit (of uranium) and certainly we can have a benefit to fueling our domestic nuclear facilities and actually help reduce that dependence on foreign uranium.”

Taking a stance on uranium mining, however, is difficult for politicians because until the study is complete, not enough is known about the

environmental and health effects of mining such a deposit in Virginia. Smith could not comment as to whether or not Webb supported uranium mining.

“Sen. Webb is encouraged that Virginia Tech, in conjunction with the National Academy of Sciences — our nation’s best, most objective scientists — are undertaking the feasibility and economic impact study into the impact of uranium mining on the community,” Smith said.

In November, Webb noted that the legislation was a “practical approach” to improving the nation’s economy and the environment.

“I just think it’s very important for people to note that their senator is taking such an active role in promoting the widespread application of nuclear power in this country,” Wales said, “and the tremendous benefits it can provide both economically and environmentally.”
