

Group visits uranium mine, mill in Canada

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Editor's note: Danville and Pittsylvania County teacher and author Larry Aaron was among a group that traveled to Saskatchewan, Canada, last week to visit a working uranium mine and mill.

The trip was funded by Virginia Uranium Inc., which hopes to mine the Coles Hill uranium deposit northeast of Chatham.

Danville City Councilman David Luther and Pittsylvania County economic director Ken Bowman were also on the trip.

By LARRY AARON/Special to the Star-Tribune

SASKATCHEWAN, Canada - Along with some other local citizens and Virginia state legislators I arrived in Saskatoon, Canada, on Monday, Sept. 26, and on Tuesday morning left by plane for northern Saskatchewan. There we visited Cameco's uranium mine operation at Eagle Point and their Rabbit Lake milling operations.

But, you ask, what's uranium mining in Canada got to do with Pittsylvania County over 1800 miles away. Well, a lot actually.

On the flight to the mining and milling sites, flat prairie farmland with its grain fields gave way to higher forested elevations varying between 400-500 feet. Different mind you, but not so dissimilar from Pittsylvania County.

Water was everywhere, and even more so at our destination. The abundant lakes, resulting from glaciers scraping out the land, appeared from the window of the plane like elongated strings of pearls. By the time we neared the uranium operation there seemed to be as much water as land.

Indeed the uranium mining site is situated on a peninsula with Wollaston Lake on one side and Collins Bay on the other. While drier than other parts of Canada, the mine area gets 20 inches of rain to our average of about 40.

But that's not all. In our first briefing, Maurice Balych, Cameco's superintendent of environment and reclamation at the Rabbit Lake uranium mill, told us that each year it starts snowing in October and stays on the ground until June, accumulating 5-6 feet. (It had already snowed previous to our visit.)

The months of June and July have the majority of the rainfall and as air masses collide over

Saskatchewan, sometimes thunderstorms get serious.

Our visit was serious as well; we didn't just look around. In our briefings at the mine and milling site Balych and others offered scientific, technological and workforce information regarding what goes on there.

We asked lots of pointed questions and Cameco officials were generous and transparent with their answers. There was never any hesitation on their part to give extensive explanations.

Nor did they restrict us in videotaping or taking pictures throughout our visit. Neither was there any restriction on who we could talk to. I do not know how they could have been more cooperative.

After an extensive tour of the milling plant, we went into the uranium mine and followed the tunnel under Wollaston Lake. There we viewed actual drilling as they prepared to retrieve more ore.

Before we got there, however, a real emergency happened in the mine. The ventilation fans shut down and we were all ushered to a room labeled Refuge Station. It had its own oxygen supplies and safety equipment and was sealed off from the rest of the mine.

This was not planned for our benefit, because the whole operation stops until this problem is corrected, which it was and we continued our tour.

However, it illustrates, at least from my observations, that Cameco leaves no stone unturned when it comes to the safety of the workers or the environment.

In fact, Balych said uranium mining is so safe that his brother, who is a pilot, gets about five times as much radiation per year as he does working at the mine.

The lack of environmental and health issues was a common theme among those we met from Cameco.

For instance, in a casual conversation I had with Val Schwindt, safety director at the Cameco operations, he stated that he could not recall any pollution or health problems with the company's modern-day mining methods.

I asked him to what extent the mine is regulated by the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission. He remarked that the CNSC does not tolerate any failure to correct a problem and if not done by their deadline, in his words: "They will shut you down."

Lest his comments appear self-serving and protective of Cameco, he actually works for the contractors who service the company, not the company itself.

Like Schwindt, everyone I talked to at the mine and milling site only reinforced what I already knew about uranium and its effects. There were no surprises.

Just to be sure though, as we traveled back to Saskatoon for Wednesday's meeting with government officials, I searched the landscape in vain for a three-headed cow. No surprise there either.

And I didn't glow in the dark that night.

More next week.