

# MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

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## Geologist Supports Uranium Mining

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A geologist from the Virginia Museum of Natural History said Tuesday he does not foresee major health or environmental risks from a proposed uranium mining operation in Pittsylvania County.

Dr. Jim Beard told the Martinsville Rotary Club that he hopes a state study will allow mining to proceed at the Coles Hill deposit in Chatham.

With 119 million pounds of untapped uranium ore worth about \$10 billion, the deposit is believed to be the largest trove in the country and the seventh largest in the world.

The Virginia Commission on Coal and Energy voted in November to study whether uranium can be safely mined there. No uranium can be mined in Virginia unless the General Assembly lifts a 1981 ban.

"Uranium has this aura of horribleness around it, but it's not that toxic," Beard said.

"I would have no objection to living a mile from that mine myself," he added. "I think the risks are going to turn out to be small."

Beard said he thinks the state "is proceeding in a responsible fashion" by doing the study.

"If they determine it should be mined, I think it should be mined," he said. "I hope for the sake of Virginia, and Southside Virginia in particular, that it works out."

Beard said uranium mining would create an important domestic source of energy for the United States.

"The energy potential of that mine is 100 times the total potential of offshore drilling" for oil off Virginia's coast, he said, adding that the uranium's potential equates to one fourth of the country's oil reserves over the next 15 to 20 years.

"If we're going to have some energy stability in this country, we have to make some choices," he said.

Nuclear power is "the wave of the future" and already is widely used in Europe, Beard said.

"This is an opportunity for Southside Virginia to move forward in an industry that will be very, very important in the 21st century," he said.

Beard said there is "certainly a problem with the waste" created from using nuclear energy, "but everything has a cost."

He added that there is "not a huge volume of waste from nuclear power. I think that's a solvable problem."

One of the biggest concerns is whether contaminants from the mining will leach into groundwater.

"I don't think it will be a problem," Beard said, because he said the ore minerals are stable.

Mining opponents have expressed concern that communities downstream of

the mine could experience serious water contamination, but "no way is that going to happen," Beard said.

Another concern is whether mining would release radioactive dust into the air.

"Airborne dust is going to be a problem with any mining operation, not just uranium," Beard said.

Radon already is escaping from this deposit, he said. More radon probably will be dispersed if mining begins, he said, "but it's going to be so dispersed, I'm sure it won't be a problem."

The mine would be roughly the scale of the quarry in Fieldale and would entail some of the same disruptions, with "trucks and blasting," Beard said.

"You can't say everything's going to be rosy and perfect" near the mine site, he said. "But there's very little disruption for a lot of good."

In uranium mining, ore is taken out of the ground and processed into yellow cake. The substance does not become dangerous until it is enriched, Beard said.

The Martinsville Rotary Club has heard opinions from both sides of the uranium mining issue. Past speakers have included a geologist from Virginia Uranium Inc., the company formed by families whose land sits above the uranium, and the head of Southside Concerned Citizens, an organization that opposes the proposed mining operation.

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