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Editorial: Let Virginia uranium study proceed

Examiner Staff Writer 8/21/08

Southside Virginia has the largest undeveloped uranium deposit in the United States - and the seventh largest in the world - but thanks to a state moratorium, the valuable ore cannot be extracted, not even to fuel the commonwealth's own nuclear reactors. As with oil, the United States continues to buy the bulk of its uranium from foreign countries - including a third of the total from Russia - because we're not allowed access to our own natural resources.

Do the math: America's 104 nuclear reactors, which produce a fifth of our electricity, consume 60 million pounds of uranium annually, while U.S. mines produce less than 5 million pounds. As the global demand for uranium increases, our dependence will grow - while Virginians sit on an estimated 110 million pounds they're not allowed to touch in Pittsylvania County. That is because the House of Delegates' Rules Committee voted in March to kill a study to determine whether the ore can be safely extracted.

The American Nuclear Society says that a single seven-gram pellet of uranium is equivalent to 149 gallons of oil, 17,000 cubic feet of natural gas and a ton of coal. It would take 20,000 giant windmills to replace the 1.6 billion watts produced by Dominion's North Anna Nuclear Power Station, but lawmakers won't even consider a \$10 billion project that could revitalize all of Southside, while furthering the nation's quest for energy security.

The uranium lode was discovered in 1978 by geologist Norm Reynolds, now chief executive officer of Virginia Uranium Inc., set up by the two families that own the mineral rights on the property. The radioactive ore is so close to the surface, Reynolds told The Washington Examiner, he found the deposit driving down the road with a sophisticated Geiger counter, and was "pleasantly surprised" by its size and high quality.

Even though uranium ore is about as radioactive as granite, the Virginia uranium remains untapped three decades later even as electric rates have jumped 18 percent in the commonwealth. Nuclear power offers a safe, clean way out of the current energy crisis, but Virginia remains one of just four states that ban uranium mining even though - as the Manhattan Institute's Max Schultz pointed out in a recent article in the Wall Street Journal - mining is actually the safest step in the nuclear fuel cycle. Like their fellow obstructionists in Congress who won't even consider offshore drilling for oil, a handful of state legislators in Richmond are blocking development of another major domestic energy source. They shouldn't be allowed to get away with it.

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