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Uranium mining study is a fine beginning

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As work begins on a study of uranium mining in Virginia, it's becoming clearer what that study will do and what it won't.

It will answer some questions about the effect similar mining operations have on health and safety. It will likely generate new questions that require additional research. But it will not be the definitive word on whether uranium can be mined safely in Pittsylvania County or any other corner of the state.

Supporters say there are billions of dollars of uranium ore in the ground near Chatham. Many nearby residents tried to block the study, fearing lawmakers will use it as political cover to approve a venture that would churn out new tax revenues.

Virginia Beach leaders pressed for a sophisticated, comprehensive and expensive analysis on the potential risks to Lake Gaston, which lies downstream from the proposed site and provides drinking water to nearly 900,000 residents of Hampton Roads.

The study approved by a legislative panel last month is unlikely to satisfy any of those groups. But the analysis, which could take up to 18 months to complete, should be viewed as a valuable first step toward assessing the potential dangers and rewards from permitting one or more mining operations in the commonwealth.

The study will be performed by the National Academy of Sciences, a reputable organization with no financial stake in its outcome. Researchers will examine uranium mining in locations around the world that are comparable to Virginia in terms of population, hydrology and weather conditions. Other uranium mines in the United States are located in more arid climates that don't offer a valid comparison.

The NAS will not examine specific plans for the Pittsylvania site. That's beyond its normal scope of research. Besides, Virginia Uranium Inc. has not yet released a detailed accounting of

how it would mine and mill uranium or how it would dispose of waste from the operations.

The team of scientists performing the study isn't being asked to approve or reject a mining permit for Pittsylvania County. Instead, the group will assemble research for state legislators to consider as they determine whether to lift a 27-year moratorium on uranium mining.

If legislators end the ban, Virginia Uranium and any other would-be developer will be subjected to a lengthy battery of federal, state and local regulatory examinations.

There's a good chance the question of whether to keep Virginia's moratorium will be answered with a resounding "maybe." That's not a bad outcome.

Both advocates and opponents of uranium mining quote a confusing array of statistics, much of it from questionable sources. It's time to let the scientists jump in and sort out the facts from the fabrications.