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Fear keeps Virginia from exploring Pittsylvania's natural resource

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GUEST COLUMNIST

ONE WOULD expect that in these difficult economic times, and given our enslavement to the arbitrary price fluctuations of foreign energy sources, any community in the Commonwealth would take advantage of the opportunity to develop a natural resource that could create hundreds of jobs, produce billions of dollars in revenue and put millions in the state coffers.

Such an opportunity exists in Pittsylvania County — in an area known as Coles Hill, where one of the largest deposits of uranium in this country was discovered several decades ago.

Yet several vocal groups, as well as Virginia Beach City Council, have mounted opposition to mining that uranium on the premise that a highly improbable weather event may cause the mine tailings — 200 miles away — to contaminate our water supply.

Councilwoman Barbara Henley of Virginia Beach has even gone so far as to state that we in Hampton Roads “may stand to be the big losers.”

The logic of that statement escapes me, but let's first consider what we have to gain. The Coles Hill project will create 300-500 mining jobs, plus related positions such as heavy equipment operators, truck drivers, and those who will work at the neighboring processing mill. Add support staff and the work force in that area will grow by more than 1,000 people.

While improvement of a county economy 200 miles away may not seem like a huge issue, billions in corporate income

mean hundreds of millions in corporate state tax revenue. And those 1,000 workers will be consumers and taxpayers. Both of the above mean a huge infusion into the general coffers, not to mention a huge step toward energy independence.

We must proceed with caution, of course, with any large industrial project, especially one dealing with nuclear materials. And it is part of the state energy plan to ensure that a thorough study of the Coles Hill project is conducted before it is approved.

However, it is apparent from my limited discussions with city officials to date that nothing is going to be good enough for them. Despite my own credentials as a licensed professional engineer with more than 30 years of experience in the nuclear field, I've been told by the Virginia Beach director of Public Works and my city councilman that I'm simply siding with the industry. Perhaps they have forgotten that my wife, children and grandchildren live here, too.

Indeed, the premise that our water supply is in danger reflects an ignorance of the water chemistry and material characteristics of uranium and its related products, which make such long-distance transport virtually impossible.

Our local officials also contend that there is zero tolerance for any radiological contaminants in any body of water we use for our water supply. That position ignores several facts:

Uranium is a naturally occurring component of soils, building materials and

coal. It already is present in every source of our water supply, as well as our homes, office buildings and yards.

Radon, the decay product of uranium most frequently cited as a danger, is steadily emitted from the earth below us and accumulates in our buildings. The simple fact that we construct airtight buildings accounts for more human radon exposure than all of the mines in this country combined.

Even the postulated worst-case scenario would not significantly increase the background exposure we already receive from those naturally occurring sources and would not add measurable isotopes to those already in Lake Gaston.

Finally, we are exposed to far more hazardous contaminants than uranium every day in this area. Ships, trucks and trains carrying deadly chemicals come in and out of the port every day, many of which have the potential to contaminate our air and water supply in a severe accident. Yet we tolerate that risk because of the benefit to our economy.

So when you read in the coming months about Coles Hill, remember to keep the big picture. While there are potential risks with any large project, we stand to lose much more by leaving our natural resources in the ground.

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