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Contact: Patrick Wales (434) 432-1065 office
(434) 770-4662 mobile
pwales@vauinc.com

Julie Rautio (804)771-5301 office
(804)218-9544 mobile
julie@capresults.net

National Academy of Sciences Study Provides 'Road Map' for Virginia to Host

Safest Uranium Mine in the World

Richmond, VA – The National Academy of Sciences today released the findings of its 18-month study of the potential public health and environmental impacts of uranium mining in Virginia.

“Virginia Uranium believes this study provides a clear road map and path forward for operating the world’s safest uranium mine in Virginia,” said Virginia Uranium, Inc. project manager, Patrick Wales. “The study shows that major technological and regulatory advances over the past 30 years have dramatically improved the environmental and public health performance of the uranium mining and milling industry,” Wales continued. “Virginia Uranium is committed to continuing that process by adopting the best practices and regulatory requirements identified by the NAS as essential to protecting the environment and public health.”

“The concluding chapter of the report, in particular, provides a road map for how Virginia can design a regulatory structure to govern the safest uranium mining program in the world,” said Wales. This chapter identifies a list of best practices that should be required in a regulatory program when Virginia decides to allow uranium mining in the state. These recommendations rely heavily on the track record of modern uranium mining operations in Canada and Colorado, which have been proven successful at managing many of the environmental and health risks associated with the industry in the 1950’s.

“The NAS study states time and again that best practices now widely adopted by the industry have been effective at protecting water and air quality and overall public health,” said Wales. “In particular, the report singles out the impact of heavily-lined, below-grade tailings disposal and the adoption of underground ventilation as having a significant impact on preserving water quality and worker safety,” Wales added. “We fully intend to use these state-of-the-industry practices at Coles Hill.”

The NAS says that “tailings impoundment sites will be safe for at least 200 years...” “We are fortunate,” Wales added, “that the underlying geology at the Coles Hill site is a very hard granite rock that has largely remained unchanged for the last 400 million years. This kind of setting will help ensure the safety and maintenance of our tailings facilities beyond the 200-1,000 year requirement specified by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.”

The NAS report acknowledges that if the moratorium is lifted in 2012, it will take an additional 5 to 8 years before the Coles Hill project could receive all the necessary permits to begin operating. “Our company is confident that this lengthy timeframe will allow the General Assembly, state and federal agencies and community residents to thoroughly examine every aspect of this issue and make sure that the regulations are in place and best practices are fully adopted to protect the health and well-being of our community,” said Wales.

The study states, “There exists internationally accepted best practices, founded on principles of openness, transparency, and public involvement in oversight and decision-making, that could provide a starting point for the Commonwealth of Virginia were it to decide that the moratorium should be lifted.” They describe the practices in Chapter 8 of the report and emphasize the following:

With respect to all aspects of mining and processing, the NAS study recommends that Virginia’s regulatory program embrace the stringent ALARA standard (as low as reasonably achievable) for impacts on public health and the environment. The report suggests that adopting such a standard would allow the state’s regulations to be continuously updated and improved to reflect the most advanced practices. In addition to this broad recommendation, there are 6 specific suggestions made by the study committee:

1. Ensure that the life-cycle costs as well as long term stewardship needs are reflected in the type of, and amount of, the financial surety.
2. Ensure that inspection and enforcement tools are transparent, practical, sufficient, available, independent and sustainable.
3. While the development of this new regulatory structure could be based on existing laws, the optimum approach would be for an entirely new mining, processing and reclamation law or laws be enacted.
4. Effective interagency integration and coordination.
5. Active engagement in the regulatory processes of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to ensure good federal/state coordination. Additionally, considerable international expertise and knowledge in regulatory best practices should be sought.
6. Include the modern best practice of requiring an environmental impact assessment prior to the commencement of any mining activities.

The study findings were presented to the Uranium Mining Subcommittee of the Virginia Coal & Energy Commission by the study committee’s chair, Dr. Paul Locke, Director of the Public Health Program and Department of Environmental Health Sciences at the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health.

“As a company, we are pleased with the road map this study lays out. It embraces many of the concepts we have advocated as a company. We have employed many of the same principles in our exploration work, such as ALARA, already. In fact, one of our guiding principles has been to welcome scrutiny from local, state, and federal regulatory bodies and strive to meet or exceed their standards. We also invite the review and participation of responsible environmental groups, as well as that of citizens. The study emphasizes the importance of public engagement, and as a company we embrace it.”

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