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Uranium Study Finally Moves Ahead in State

By EDITORIAL STAFF

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Tuesday in Richmond, a little bit of scientific sanity prevailed in the debate over whether a massive uranium deposit in neighboring Pittsylvania County can be safely mined.

And it's about time.

The Uranium Mining Subcommittee, created by the General Assembly, agreed on the parameters for a scientific study of the question and the steps the complete process would take.

Uranium mining is a hot topic in Southside Virginia, especially in Pittsylvania. Just outside the county seat of Chatham, on the family farm of Walter Coles, lies one of the largest untapped uranium reserves in the United States.

Three decades ago, when the proposal to extract the ore from the ground first surfaced, safety issues and fears lingering after the 1979's Three Mile Island accident led to the General Assembly imposing a mining moratorium.

And there the matter has sat... until just a couple of years ago, that is.

The intervening three decades

have seen demand for electricity rise exponentially in the United States. To meet that need, there must be additional generating capacity in the country.

Virginian Uranium is a company the Coles family set up to explore the logistics of mining. For two years, the company has been pushing for the state to reconsider the moratorium, in light of the intervening years of scientific study and development of new mining technologies.

Environmental activists have risen up to fight even efforts to talk about conducting a safety and feasibility study, much less actually doing a study.

Finally, that logjam has been broken.

Prof. Michael Karmis, a mining technology expert at Virginia Tech, presented the state panel with a two-pronged approach to studying the matter.

After contacting the [National Research Council] to ascertain the top experts in the field, the NRC-recommended experts would first determine whether the deposit can be safely mined and how. If the

determination is that safe extraction is possible, then a second study would examine the social and economic implications of mining for Pittsylvania County. Armed with the results of the two studies, it would then be up to the General Assembly to make a political decision as to whether to allow mining.

America's need for additional electrical power is only going to grow in the years ahead. Wind- and solar-generated power can only go so far in meeting that need. Conservation, while a socially laudable thing to do and something that makes infinite business sense, can only meet so much of the demand. (Fossil-fuel generated power? Don't even mention that to the environmentalists.)

It is simply good public policy to conduct an impartial, scientific study of this important question. Mining foes, who've used various tactics in the past to cow their opponents and study backers, are doing the nation no good in their attempts to ground any decision in this matter on fear and emotion, rather than cold, hard science.