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DANVILLE VIRGINIA

Thank you, Mister Secretary

BY NORMAN W. REYNOLDS

U. S. Energy Secretary Steven Chu could not have picked a better spot than Pittsylvania County to sound his ringing call for “restarting” our nation’s nuclear energy program, as well as endorsing Virginia’s state-sanctioned study to assess the safety and feasibility of mining and milling uranium in the Commonwealth.

The setting for Dr. Chu’s speech at a local farm last Saturday was just 10 miles south of the Coles Hill uranium site and 50 miles south of the City of Lynchburg, one of the most dynamic hubs of advanced nuclear technology in Virginia. Coles Hill is where Virginia Uranium proposes to mine and mill the largest known undeveloped uranium deposit in the United States.

Speaking to concerns that have been raised about mining in Virginia, Dr. Chu, a Nobel laureate in physics, explained that in “any kind of mining, whether it’s uranium, coal or nickel, or you name it, it has to be done in a way that protects the environment and protects the people....there’s a study going on as to whether uranium mining in Virginia is going to do that....we will wait for the results of that study.”

The Virginia Coal and Energy Commission is working with the National Academy of Sciences to conduct an independent study to address concerns of Virginians about safety to people, livestock, crops and the environment.

The secretary’s position on the uranium potential at Coles Hill seemed to reflect that of his boss, President Obama. When the President was campaigning in

Virginia last year, the Roanoke Times carried the following report:

“According to an e-mail from his Virginia communications director, Obama supports a proposed study of the [Coles Hill] site to evaluate the potential environmental effects of mining. But, he adds, ‘Virginia has the potential to be a national leader in uranium mining, and development of uranium resources in Pittsylvania County could create hundreds of jobs in that part of the state.’”

On the larger subject of using nuclear energy to power America, Dr. Chu told the local audience of around 275 people that the Obama Administration and the U.S. Department of Energy are “very supportive of restarting the nuclear power industry,” adding that he believes it can be done safely.

Secretary Chu’s comments echo those heard from various Virginia officials over the past two years, starting with the Virginia Energy Plan released in the fall of 2007. In addition to numerous references to the massive uranium deposit in Southside Virginia, the energy plan states: “There are sufficient resources to support a uranium mining industry in Pittsylvania County with enough to meet the fuel needs of Virginia’s current generation. Significant work to assess the risk from mining and need for regulatory controls must be completed before any decision can be made whether such mining should take place.”

For those of us who have worked long and hard on the Coles Hill project, it is gratifying

that the nation’s highest energy official saw fit to come to Pittsylvania County and to endorse the scientific study and to state so unequivocally the Obama Administration’s high commitment to getting nuclear back on track in the United States. We look forward to moving ahead hand in hand with such enlightened thinking.

We haven’t the slightest doubt that all aspects of the nuclear cycle—from mining to operating reactors—can be done as safely as any other industrial undertaking. When the same safety issues were studied by the state 25 years ago, scientists found that under well-defined guidelines our project could go forward safely. I am confident that similar findings will be reached this go-around.

What Dr. Chu is talking about goes straight to the heart of energy independence for our nation. Yes, we need to move ahead on all fronts that make sense. But let us keep in mind that of the 55 million pounds of uranium needed to operate nuclear facilities for one year in this country, over 50 million pounds are imported. That is a frightening statistic in a world as unpredictable as the one in which we are living.

We should be grateful for the enlightened approach expressed by Secretary Chu. And we should support sensible efforts to achieve greater energy independence, including the full development of our nuclear resources.

Norman Reynolds is president and chief executive officer of Virginia Uranium Inc., as well as Virginia Energy Resources.
