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DANVILLE VIRGINIA

Uranium mining: The journey ‘from myth to fact’

By TARA BOZICK

One lifelong environmentalist shared how her extensive research turned her from a staunch opponent of nuclear power to an advocate.

“The journey I made was from myth to fact,” journalist and author Gwyneth Cravens told about 60 residents. “I was glad to have the gradual removal of my prejudice through science-based information.”

Virginia Uranium Inc. sponsored Cravens’ lecture at Danville Golf Club Wednesday night to help educate the community on the issues surrounding uranium mining, said VUI founding chairman and CEO Walter Coles Sr. Coles said many uranium myths have arisen in the region.

Cravens, author of “Power to Save the World: The Truth About Nuclear Energy,” clarified a lot of the misconceptions surrounding the nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium mining.

For instance, while people associate radiation and cancer, long-term studies show there is zero evidence of an increase in cancers from uranium, she said.

However, radon gas, which comes from the radioactive decay of uranium, does cause lung cancer. Yet, properly ventilating underground mines solves that problem, as radon gas quickly dissipates into the air. Cravens said.

In the early years of the U.S. uranium industry, few regulations existed and some of the Navajos who worked in underground mines that weren’t properly ventilated developed lung cancer.

Now, farmers who plow the soil may get exposed to more radon than uranium miners do, she said. Cravens advised residents to check their basements for radon gas.

Many people don’t understand most of our exposure to radiation comes from Mother Nature, or that uranium exists everywhere in rocks, soil, water, food and consumer products. Now, medical radiation like X-rays is rivaling natural background radiation for how much exposure humans get.

A person gets more radiation by eating a single banana, because of its potassium isotopes, than living next to a nuclear plant for a year, Cravens said.

All the U.S. nuclear waste could fit in a Home Depot, but Americans don’t think about the 179,000 tons of toxic batteries that decay heavy metals entering landfills each year.

Cravens, with the help of friend and scientist and environmentalist Rip Anderson, began to become more informed about nuclear energy and actual risks, and slowly changed her mind.

“There are mental barriers that we have that block facts,” she said.

She realizes electricity doesn’t just come from flipping a switch. It has to come from somewhere, but 71 percent of U.S. electricity comes from fossil fuel combustion which produces tons of carbon emissions. Yet, nuclear energy doesn’t have this problem.

“The big picture is it’s important to act now to plan long-term energy use and how we’re going to come about it,” Cravens said.

Bozick reports for the Danville Register & Bee.