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Residents tour uranium mining site

Trip Provided by Virginia Uranium Allays Concerns

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DANVILLE—After visiting a reclaimed uranium site in Canada, local residents feel more confident in the industry's ability to protect the environment.

Last week, Virginia Uranium Inc. paid for a trip where nine residents visited Elliot Lake in Ontario, Canada. Now a retirement community, Elliot Lake was once known as the "uranium capital of the world," operating from the 1950s to mid-1990s.

Pittsylvania County residents toured the reclaimed site, talked with site engineers and met with Elliot Lake residents, including former miners. Several agreed it was hard to tell the area had been mined.

"Before I went up, I was kind of neutral," said L.P. Moss of Spring Garden. "Now, I don't have any qualms at all about mining, lifting the moratorium."

Moss, who was concerned about water pollution, saw how local drinking water came from the lake nearby and in the same watershed as a reclaimed tailings site.

"The way's already there for maintaining the safety of the people, of the water systems," Moss said. "The technology is available."

Gretchen Clark, president of Reynolds-Clark Development Inc., feels more at ease about the environmental risks of uranium mining. Site engineers say they're 100 years ahead of schedule for the clean-up of the two mines they visited.

She agreed Elliot Lake is an example of a well-run uranium site. Yet, local residents also learned how Elliot Lake and others learned from past mistakes of the early industry, including ventilating underground mines and preventing water contamination.

She and other residents asked Elliot Lake residents to name the worst thing that happened there. The closing of the mines, they answered.

"I certainly don't have all of the answers, but I feel comfortable this project [Coles Hill] could be done safely here and I feel certain it would have an enormous positive economic impact on the community," Clark said.

Willie T. Fitzgerald, president of the Pittsylvania County Branch NAACP, sees now that it's possible to return a uranium site back to a natural landscape, but knows stringent regulations are needed to

safeguard against such errors like those of the industry's past.

Elliot Lake leaders also advised that if uranium mining were to occur in Pittsylvania County, that generated tax money should also go into a special projects fund as an economic development tool to diversify the economy and mitigate any boom or bust cycles, Fitzgerald and Clark said.

A.J. Nuckols, a Pittsylvania County farmer, was most concerned about water contamination. While he has an engineering background and has always been pro-nuclear power, the idea of living downstream of the Coles Hill site on the Banister River concerned him.

He feels more comfortable now based on his observations, but wants to know more about the science involved in a uranium operation.

As far as the Coles Hill proposed project, he said, "I don't think it will have much effect on people's day-to-day lives."

Tara Bozick writes for the Danville Register & Bee.