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CROSS COUNTRY

Virginia Is Sitting on the Energy Mother Lode

By MAX SCHULTZ

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Chatham, Va.

Amid the rolling hills and verdant pastures of south central Virginia an unlikely new front in the battle over nuclear energy is opening up. How it is decided will tell us a lot about whether this country is willing to get serious about addressing its energy needs.



AP
Walter Coles Jr. and Walter Coles Sr.
discuss uranium.

In Pittsylvania County, just north of the North Carolina border, the largest undeveloped uranium deposit in the United States -- and the seventh largest in the world, according to industry monitor UX Consulting -- sits on land owned by neighbors Henry Bowen and Walter Coles. Large uranium deposits close to the surface are virtually unknown in the U.S. east of the Mississippi River. And that may be the problem.

Virginia is one of just four states that ban uranium mining. The ban was put in place in 1984, to calm fears that had been sparked by the partial meltdown of a nuclear reactor on Three Mile Island outside of Harrisburg, Pa. in 1979.

Messrs. Bowen and Coles, who last year formed a company called Virginia Uranium, are asking the state to determine whether mining uranium really is a hazard and, if not, to lift the ban. But they've run into a brick wall of environmental activists who raise the specter of nuclear contamination and who are determined to prevent scientific studies of the issue.

The Piedmont Environmental Council is one of the leading opponents. It warns of the "enormous quantities of radioactive waste" produced by uranium mining.

Jack Dunavant, head of the Southside Concerned Citizens in nearby Halifax County, is another outspoken critic. He paints a picture of environmental apocalypse. "There will be a dead zone within a 30 mile radius of the mine," he says with a courtly drawl. "Nothing will grow. Animals will die. The radiation genetically alters tissue. Animals will not be able to reproduce. We'll see malformed fetuses."

Yet it is not as if we have no experience with uranium mining, which is in fact relatively harmless. Handled properly, the yellowcake that is extracted is no more hazardous than regular household chemicals (and unlike coal, it won't smolder and combust).

James Kelly, who directed the nuclear engineering program at the University of Virginia for many years, says that fears about uranium mining are wildly overblown. "It's an aesthetic nightmare, but otherwise safe in terms of releasing any significant radioactivity or pollution," he told me. "It would be ugly to look at, but from the perspective of any hazard I wouldn't mind if they mined across the street from me."

The situation is rich with irony as well as uranium. While you can't mine yellowcake, it is perfectly legal in Virginia to process enriched uranium into usable nuclear fuel, which *is* somewhat dangerous to handle. A subsidiary of the French nuclear giant Areva operates a fuel fabrication facility in Lynchburg 50 miles from Chatham. It has been praised by Gov. Tim Kaine, a Democrat, as a good corporate citizen. The state is also home to four commercial nuclear reactors, which provide Virginians with 35% of their electricity. And, of course, the U.S. Navy operates nuclear ships out of Norfolk, Va.

Across the country, there are 104 commercial nuclear reactors. They consume 55 million pounds of uranium annually, the vast majority of which is imported from Australia, Canada and former Soviet republics. The 200-acre Coles Hill deposit (Mr. Coles's family has lived on the spot since 1785) is thought to contain nearly twice that amount. For Messrs. Bowen and Coles, with the long-term price of uranium near \$80 per pound, that means they are sitting on about \$10 billion worth of ore. But for the rest of us, it means they are sitting on an opportunity to make the U.S. more energy self-sufficient.

Since Virginia is already a nuclear-friendly state that properly manages the risks of nuclear power, what sense does it make for the state to ban the safest step in the nuclear fuel cycle?

Gov. Kaine supports allowing the National Academy of Sciences to determine whether mining could be done safely. So does virtually every elected official in heavily Republican Pittsylvania County. Earlier this year the narrowly Democratic state Senate voted 36-4 to authorize the study. But the measure was killed in committee in the House under pressure from environmental groups. If it was allowed to come up for a vote in the full House, which is controlled by Republicans, opponents concede it would have passed.

The governor's chief energy adviser, Steve Walz, says the Kaine administration has taken no position on whether reversing the ban makes sense. "That's why we wanted to see the results of the study, to help us make a determination."

Mr. Dunavant doesn't believe the governor has an open mind on the issue. He calls Mr. Kaine, "our 'supposed green' governor" and says that the "only thing green about him is his love of money." Coles Hill "is all about greed," he says. "It's criminal activity as far as I'm concerned."

For his part, Mr. Coles can't understand the hostility. "I tell these groups that my concerns are your concerns. I have been protecting the environment here for decades, long before any of them became interested in this land." He's received offers to buy his land for sums that would make him incredibly wealthy, but has turned them down. "We love the land. My family has lived here for over 200 years. We're going to continue to live here. That's the reason we decided to keep it, as opposed to selling out." He says Virginia Uranium will continue to push for the independent study.

If the U.S. is to expand nuclear power's role in a time of energy insecurity and climate change worries, we will have to confront the hysterical antinuclear pronouncements that have been the currency of environmentalists for nearly 30 years. The Old Dominion could be a good place for a new start.

Mr. Schulz is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

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