

Uranium Lode in Va. Is Feared, Coveted

Landowner Wants to End Ban on Mining Radioactive Element Sought for Energy

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CHATHAM, Va. -- Underneath a plot of farmland used to raise cattle, hay and timber in south central Virginia lies what is thought to be the largest deposit of uranium in the United States.

Now, three decades after the deposit was found, landowner Walter Coles has set his sights on mining the 200-acre site despite concerns of environmental groups and residents about unearthed radioactive material that could contaminate the area's land, air and source of drinking water.

As the United States searches for alternative energy sources, Virginia has a geological discovery in its back yard that could drastically change the nation's reliance on foreign oil. The estimated 110 million pounds of uranium in Pittsylvania County, worth almost \$10 billion, could supply all of the country's nuclear power plants for about two years.

There's a hurdle to clear before an ounce of the element can be mined: It's illegal to dig for the stuff in Virginia. But the General Assembly is considering changing that.

Coles, 69, who recently retired from the federal government and moved from the Washington area back to the family farm, said mining companies have been offering to buy his land. Instead of taking the money, he decided to stay. He said he wanted to make sure that the mining was done safely and that it would benefit the community through jobs, taxes and economic development.

"There's too much uranium here. Somebody's going to mine it," Coles said. "I felt like while I was alive, it was my duty to make sure it was done right."

This month, Coles's company, Virginia Uranium, will try to persuade the General Assembly to take the first step -- approving a \$1 million study that will explore whether uranium can be safely mined in Virginia. If the study shows that it can be done, the company will ask the legislature to lift a state ban on uranium mining.

The issue is dividing lawmakers, who will begin their 60-day session Jan. 9, but company officials have reasons to be optimistic.

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine (D) supports a study, and a state energy report released this fall recommends one. Coles's brother-in-law, Whitt Clement, who served as a legislator and as state transportation secretary, is heading what is expected to be a strong lobbying effort. Henry Hurt, an investor and a childhood friend of Coles's, has a son Robert, a Pittsylvania delegate who won a state Senate seat in November.

Virginia banned uranium mining in 1982, but Coles's company recently got a state permit to drill 40 holes to examine the material.

A growing coalition of environmental groups and concerned residents, some of the same residents who helped institute the ban 30 years ago, have started spreading the word about their opposition and are planning to travel to Richmond to fight Coles.

Elizabeth Haskell, a former state secretary of natural resources who served on a board that studied uranium mining in the early 1980s, said Coles is thinking about money, not safety. "He has got dollar signs in his eyes," she said.

Uranium has never been mined in Virginia or on the East Coast, confined instead in the United States to drier, less populated areas such as Utah, New Mexico, Wyoming and Nebraska, according to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Uranium mining is more common in Canada, Australia, Eastern Europe and Africa.

Support for a Study

Two uranium deposits, which begin at the ground's surface and run about 800 feet deep, were found in Coles Hill, near Chatham, a town of 1,300 residents where old Victorian houses line the streets. Tobacco was once a booming business on nearby farms but has given way to soybeans, hay and cattle.

A Canadian company, Marline Uranium, found the deposits in the late 1970s after the federal government had encouraged a search for alternative energy sources. It spent millions of dollars trying to get permission to mine the land, but interest waned after uranium prices dropped.

Geologists think that smaller amounts of uranium can be found along the Piedmont from North Carolina to New York. Virginia Uranium is not interested in mining other parts of the state, but officials are passing nonbinding resolutions supporting the state ban for fear that another company might try to mine their land.

Still, with accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl a distant memory and a growing global demand for alternative fuels, interest in uranium mining is peaking.

"I believe we need to explore expansion of nuclear power," Kaine said in a recent interview.

Dominion Virginia Power has four nuclear plants in Virginia that provide about a third of the state's energy, but the uranium used at the facilities is imported. The situation in neighboring states is similar, including in Maryland, which gets 31 percent of its electricity from nuclear power, according to the federal government.

Virginia Uranium wants to mine and mill uranium that would eventually be sold to companies for use at nuclear power plants.

The company was formed about a year ago by the Coles and Bowen families, which own adjoining property. Norman Reynolds, a former Marline president, was hired as chief executive.

Thirty other people have invested in the company, several of whom live in the area, including Henry Hurt, a former editor for Reader's Digest.

Hurt's son Robert served three terms in the House before winning his Senate seat. Coles's son Walter, who is executive vice president of Virginia Uranium, and Reynolds together donated \$1,500 to Hurt last year, according to the Virginia Public Access Project.

Robert Hurt, a Republican whose House and Senate districts include Coles Hill, said he supports a study but does not have enough information to know whether he favors mining. He said he does not need to recuse himself from a vote on the study because no profit is at stake for his father.

"I take the responsibility given to me to represent 170,000 people very, very seriously," he said. He said he would not recuse himself from a vote and "leave those people voiceless without a very good reason."

Virginia Uranium says it would pay for the study but would allow it to be conducted by an independent group or university.

Del. John M. O'Bannon III (R-Henrico) said he supports a study and has spoken to Coles about sponsoring a bill in the House. "I don't think we should summarily dismiss utilizing that type of reserve," he said. "It makes sense to take a look at it in a responsible way."

Safety Concerns

Environmental groups, including the Piedmont Environmental Council and the Southern Environmental Law Center, say uranium should not be mined in Virginia's highly populated areas and relatively rainy climate. They say they are worried that radioactive materials could contaminate natural resources, cause cancer or other illnesses and have long-term effects on plants and animals. The Coles Hill area supplies drinking water locally and to parts of Hampton Roads and North Carolina.

Del. Clarke N. Hogan (R-Charlotte), whose district gets some of its drinking water from the area, said Virginia Uranium has to prove how mining can be done safely.

"They have a long way to go," he said. "They need to show what is different from 30 years ago."

Company officials say that safeguards have been put in place since mining at Coles Hill was first considered and that the federal government regulates all mines and mills with regard to safety and homeland security. Uranium can be mined three ways: through an

open pit, by miners underground or through a technology that involves pumping liquid underground and bringing it up to be processed.

Company officials said they will not know which method would work best in Pittsylvania until a study is completed, although open-pit mining is the least expensive. They will not say how much money has been invested, but they estimate they will need at least \$500 million to build a mine and mill.

Jack Dunavant, a civil engineer who leads Southside Concerned Citizens, said Coles "keeps talking about new technology that can make it safe. There is no new technology. It's a pipe dream."

No matter how the uranium might be mined, it would need to be processed at a local milling facility. The result, a sandy substance called "yellow cake" uranium, would be packed into 55-gallon drums for shipping. Company officials say the processed uranium is not hazardous. It doesn't become dangerous until it undergoes a later process that would be done elsewhere.

Coles, whose family has lived in a historic brick house on the property for two centuries, said he and his family have never had health problems, although tests show the area has higher than normal levels of radioactivity.

He said he plans to continue living at Coles Hill regardless of whether the uranium is mined.

"I could have sold the land and moved to Florida. But I didn't," he said. "I want to stay and do something good for the community, something good for the state."

Staff researcher Meg Smith contributed to this report.