

# MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2008

## Virginia Uranium geologist touts benefits of mining

By KIM BARTO  
Bulletin Staff Writer

A geologist made a pitch for mining a Pittsylvania County uranium deposit on Tuesday, saying it would create hundreds of local jobs and promote energy independence.

The Coles Hill deposit in Chatham, with 119 million pounds of untapped uranium ore, is believed to be the largest trove in the country and the seventh largest in the world. It would be worth about \$10 billion over 30 years, Patrick Wales, a Danville geologist employed by Virginia Uranium Inc., told the Martinsville Rotary Club.

Virginia Uranium was formed in 2007 by the Chatham families whose land sits above the uranium deposits.

If the state ban on uranium mining were overturned, construction and mining operations at Coles Hill would create 300 to 500 area jobs paying an average of \$65,000 to \$70,000 a year, said Wales.

"I don't need to tell you what that would do for Southside Virginia," Wales said. "If for no other reason, we need to take a look at this."

Plus, there is "no chance these jobs are going to Russia or China" because "these jobs are where the resource is," he said.

Nuclear reactors in Virginia use 1.6 million pounds of uranium per year, all of which must be imported from outside the state because of the state mining ban, Wales said. Thirty-five percent of power in Virginia comes from nuclear energy.

The Coles Hill deposit could provide enough uranium to power Virginia's existing nuclear reactors for more than 70 years, Wales said. One pound of uranium provides the energy equivalent to 20,000 pounds of coal, he added.

"This is about energy independence," Wales said.

In 2007, the United States purchased 51 million pounds of uranium and produced only 3.9 million pounds from domestic mines, Wales said. The biggest supplier of U.S. uranium is Russia, and about half of the imports come from Australia and Canada, he said.

A proposal to study uranium mining's



Patrick Wales of Virginia Uranium Inc. addresses the Martinsville Rotary Club.

impact died in the state House of Delegates committee in March. However, the state Commission on Coal and Energy, chaired by Del. Terry G. Kilgore, R-Scott, endorsed the study in a unanimous vote Nov. 6.

It would take at least two years to complete a study, Wales said, and obtaining permits from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to conduct mining operations would be at least a three-year process.

Virginia is one of four states to ban uranium mining. The moratorium was passed in 1981, two years after the partial meltdown of a nuclear reactor at Three Mile Island Unit 2. The accident remains the most serious commercial nuclear power accident in the United States.

However, Wales pointed out, the incident did not result in any injuries or fatalities. He told Rotarians that safety regulations and technology have improved greatly over the years.

The U.S. Navy, which uses nuclear-powered submarines and aircraft carriers, has "over 5,500 reactor years of accident-free experience" using uranium, he said.

Wales assured his audience that technology has improved and safety concerns have been addressed.

Waste products left over from uranium

processing, called tailings, "give people a lot of pause, but we don't do things the way we did 50 years ago," Wales said.

He explained that tailings are contained in a pit underground, "removing any interaction between the tailings and the atmosphere," he said.

"Certainly the study will look at environmental concerns," Wales said, and any such concerns "need to be vetted."

However, he added, "We feel confident that there are many examples around the world of how it's done safely."

The Coles' property, which is a "historic structure," sits between the two uranium deposits, and the family plans to continue living there while mining goes on, Wales said.

"Certainly Mr. Cole has the greatest stake in ensuring that it's done safely and in an environmentally friendly manner," he said.

The Virginia Uranium Web site claims radioactivity has always been present at Coles Hill, and the closest neighbor will not receive any more radiation from mining over a four-year period than from a single chest x-ray.

The company also says it will monitor groundwater and comply with federal regulations to prevent contamination.

Wales mentioned as a worst-case scenario the Canonsburg Mill site in Canonsburg, Pa. The plant which stopped processing uranium in 1957 but left radioactive tailings "out on the ground" for decades, Wales said.

In the mid-1980s, the Department of Energy cleaned up the site and contained the waste in a disposal area lined with soil and clay barriers. Since then, Wales said, "Not one milling-related constituent has shown up" in a nearby creek.

One Rotarian asked how far will dust blow from mining operations. Wales responded that it depends on which method of mining is used.

"If you use underground mining, it's a moot point," he said. Even if other methods are used, he added, "There is very little dust. There may be a little puff when blasting."