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Chatham, Virginia

Uranium study gets green light

By **TIM DAVIS**
CHATHAM STAR-TRIBUNE

The National Research Council has agreed to conduct a statewide scientific study on uranium mining in Virginia.

William Kearney, a spokesman for the National Research Council in Washington, D.C., said a contract for the long-awaited study has been approved and signed with Virginia Tech.

The university will serve as a conduit for funding from Virginia Uranium Inc., which has agreed to pay for the \$1.4 million study.

“Once we have the signed contract and funding is released, we’ll begin,” Kearney said Tuesday.

The study will take about 18 months. A final report is due Dec. 1, 2011.

According to Kearney, the first step will be for the National Research Council to solicit recommendations for experts to serve on the committee that will conduct the study.

He said the committee will be composed of about a dozen scientists from the National Academies of Science and Engineering as well as the council’s own scientific staff, academia and government officials.

“The goal is to pick a committee with the expertise to carry out the objectives

of the study and also be balanced from a scientific perspective,” said Kearney.

Nominations will be posted on the council’s website for a 20-day public comment period.

“The committee remains provisional until every member has complied with our conflict of interest policy,” the spokesman said.

Kearney expects the committee to be approved this spring and begin meeting early this summer.

He said one of the group’s first public meetings will be in Danville.

Virginia Uranium Inc. announced plans three years ago to explore mining uranium at Coles Hill, about six miles northeast of Chatham.

Discovered in the early 1980s, the uranium deposit is one of the largest in the United States and is worth an estimated \$8 billion to \$10 billion.

Virginia Uranium chairman Walter Coles was pleased to see the study move forward.

“We’re happy it’s finally taking place after such a long struggle,” said Coles, whose family owns a majority of the uranium deposit.

He added that, with a renewed

“renaissance” in nuclear power, the study has national and possibly global implications.

The National Research Council presented its recommendations for a study in May to the Virginia Commission on Coal and Energy’s Uranium Mining Subcommittee.

The subcommittee, chaired by Del. Lee Ware of Powhatan, voted 8-2 to approve a framework for the study and made public safety a top priority.

According to the National Research Council’s “Statement of Task,” the study will “examine the scientific, technical, environmental, human health and safety, and regulatory aspects of uranium mining, milling, and processing as they relate to the Commonwealth of Virginia for the purpose of assisting the commonwealth to determine whether uranium mining, milling, and processing can be undertaken in a manner that safeguards the environment, natural and historic resources, agricultural lands, and the health and well-being of its citizens.”

In particular, the study will:

- Assess the potential short- and long-term occupational and public health

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and safety considerations from uranium mining, milling, processing, and reclamation, including the potential human health risks from exposure to “daughter” products of radioactive decay of uranium.

- Review global and national uranium market trends.
- Identify and briefly describe the main types of uranium deposits worldwide including, for example, geologic characteristics, mining operations, and best practices.
- Analyze the impact of uranium mining, milling, processing, and reclamation operations on public health, safety, and the environment at sites with comparable geologic, hydrologic, climatic, and population characteristics to those found in the commonwealth. Such analysis shall describe any available mitigating measures to reduce or eliminate the negative impacts from uranium operations.
- Review the geologic, environmental, geographic, climatic, and cultural settings and exploration status of uranium resources in Virginia.
- Review the primary technical options and best practices

approaches for uranium mining, milling, processing, and reclamation that might be applicable within Virginia, including discussion of improvements made since 1980 in the design, construction, and monitoring of tailings impoundments (“cells”).

- Review the state and federal regulatory framework for uranium mining, milling, processing, and reclamation.
- Review federal requirements for secure handling of uranium materials, including personnel, transportation, site security, and material control and accountability.
- Identify the issues that may need to be considered regarding the quality and quantity of groundwater and surface water, and the quality of soil and air from uranium mining, milling, processing, and reclamation. As relevant, water and waste management and severe weather effects or other stochastic events may also be considered.
- Assess the potential ecosystem issues for uranium mining, milling, processing, and reclamation.
- Identify baseline data and approaches necessary to monitor environmental

and human impacts associated with uranium mining, milling, processing, and reclamation.

- Provide a non-technical summary of the report for public education purposes (for example, health and safety issues, inspection and enforcement, community right-to-know, emergency planning).

The National Research Council, however, will not offer recommendations on whether uranium mining should be permitted, and the study will not include “site-specific” assessments.

That decision will be left to the General Assembly, which placed a moratorium on uranium mining in 1982.

Coal and Energy Commission chairman Del. Terry Kilgore said the state also plans to conduct a study of the socioeconomic impact of uranium mining.

The second study, which will address the effects of uranium mining on businesses, schools and the community, will be conducted by another organization and funded separately, the chairman said.