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DANVILLE VIRGINIA

Educate yourself about radiation

BY CAROL S. EAST

My husband's and my families have lived and farmed in eastern Pittsylvania County for more generations than I can easily count.

We live less than four miles from the Coles Hill uranium site and were here during the controversy of the early 1980s. We have no financial connection with Virginia Uranium Inc., although we consider the company's principals to be responsible friends and neighbors.

Twenty-five years ago, when our children were small and I was very busy, I never learned enough about the uranium project to know whether I thought it was risky or actually a wonderful opportunity for the community and the region. But one thing was certain: The people who claimed to know the most about it were clearly driven by agendas that had little regard for factual information. The folks who talked the most seemed to know the least.

This time around, I decided to find out the truth for myself.

I decided against using the Internet for my research and, instead, headed to the

classroom to find out what I needed to know for the sake of our children and grandchildren — and all those who might follow.

A good place to start seemed to be radiation, since the root of most concerns seems to lie in the radioactive nature of uranium.

I signed up for a course called "Understanding Nuclear Radiation" at Central Virginia Community College in Lynchburg. While there, I heard about a week-long workshop on the subject at the University of Richmond, so I signed up for that also.

What I learned is that radiation has been a life-sustaining force since the formation of the Earth. It is essential to our lives. I learned that we always have been exposed to radiation in the air, from outer space and from the water and food we consume. Without radiation, the Earth would be a cold and barren place.

The common measure used for exposure to radiation is the millirem. On average, each person in the United States



is exposed to 360 millirem of radiation each year. How you reach that average exposure level for the year depends upon factors such as the elevation of your hometown, the construction materials in your house, how much time you spend in the sun and many other circumstances.

Some people receive less than 360 millirem per year — and some receive more. But 360 millirem is the average amount received by each of us across the United States.

We pick up radiation from watching television and additional radiation from flying cross country on an airliner. Life-saving medical procedures increase our dosage of radiation. A routine chest X-ray delivers six millirems, while the much more serious CAT-scan delivers 110 millirems.

What I learned is that under normal conditions, radiation causes no harm to our bodies. Intense exposure to radiation can be harmful, and that is why you see

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medical and dental technicians taking precautions as they go about their work on a day-after-day basis.

Nothing I learned supported the wild claims of radiation ruining the air and water in a modern, properly managed uranium mining and milling operation. For what it's worth, if you live within 50 miles of a coal-fired power plant, you get more exposure to radiation than if you live the same distance from a nuclear power plant.

If you've noticed, nearly everything being thrown around about uranium mining — things like death zones, deformed babies, destroyed rivers — all are rooted in unregulated mining activities that occurred 30 to 50 years ago.

Has anyone noticed that all those activities are illegal today? Has anyone noticed that we are living in a time of powerful government oversight regulating everything from where we can smoke to whether a child can ride in the back of a pick-up truck?

What this knowledge means to me is that if the Coles Hill project goes forward with all the safeguards we can expect from federal and state authorities, our region will see a multi-billion-dollar expansion of economic opportunity that will benefit all of us in countless ways. It also means that we will contribute to our nation's energy independence — which is a vital factor in our national security.

One of the most peculiar arguments

I hear against this project is that the uranium has always been in the ground and man has no business removing it — that we should leave it alone. But water also is in the ground — as well as oil and gas and all the marvelous minerals man has mined and used to build our civilization.

After taking the classes and learning the truth about radiation exposure, I see this local uranium resource as yet another gift to be extracted from the Earth and used intelligently for the good of mankind, as well as the Dan River Region.

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