**Virginia Department of Health Public Comment Meeting for Private Wells, Water Supplies, and Recreational Waters**

August 7, 2012, Circuit Court Building, Chatham, Virginia

The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) sponsored two public meetings in Chatham on August 7th and 8th to collect questions and comments from the public regarding private wells, public water supplies, and recreational waters as these relate to the potential for uranium mining and milling in Virginia. Notice of the meetings was provided via the Uranium Working Group (UWG) website (<http://www.uwg.vi.virginia.gov/index.shtml>), and the Commonwealth Calendar.

The first public meeting was held in the Circuit Court Building at 3 North Main Street, Chatham on August 7, 2012, from 5:00 P.M until 8:30 P.M. All interested parties were invited to speak after signing up. Approximately 70 members of the public attended the meeting, and 23 individuals made public comments.

At the second meeting on August 8th, VDH invited interested parties to participate in a facilitated full-day discussion of concerns and comments identified during the evening meeting the previous day as well as any other concerns to be shared by the participants. The second meeting was held in the County Administration Building at 1 Center Street, Chatham. Those interested in participating in the day-long session on August 8th were required to register in advance. Participation was limited to 20 persons, selected at random from those registered.

The objective of both public meetings was to gather questions and comments from the public on behalf of the UWG regarding potential impacts to private wells, public water supplies, and recreational waters from uranium mining and milling should the current moratorium on uranium mining and milling be lifted. Questions and comments identified through these meetings will be incorporated into the ongoing study being conducted by the UWG.

The following is a summary of the comments received during the public comment meeting on August 7, 2012.

Agricultural Comments, Concerns, and Questions

Several participants suggested that the Virginia Department of Health should evaluate the potential effects of uranium mining and milling on agricultural facilities. Participants voiced concern that public perception of agricultural products produced near a uranium mining and milling site would be negative. A participant commented that one supermarket chain declined to sell milk produced in Pennsylvania after the Three Mile Island nuclear incident. Another participant stated that, even if produce from an area near uranium mine and mill were to be deemed safe, many people still would not purchase products from that area. Participants also pointed to potential economic impacts that could be associated with agricultural concerns. One participant commented that the dairy industry brings in $30 million dollars per year in Pittsylvania County. A dairy farmer asked what the protocol would be for testing milk produced at his farm. Another participant commented that in order to maintain his certification to sell organic produce he is required to monitor irrigation and process water for biological pathogens, but he does not know how to monitor for radioactive material if required to do so. One participant commented that during a visit to a mine near Rabbit Lake [Saskatchewan] a regulator of the mine stated there are no agricultural facilities in the area of the Rabbit Lake mine, but if there were facilities within 5 kilometers, or 3.11 miles they would be regulated.

Water Quality Comments, Concerns, and Questions

Many of the participants voiced concern over the potential impacts that a uranium mine and mill would have on quality and quantity of both surface water and ground water. One participant commented that ground water in the Coles Hill area is less than 50 years old and is considered at risk of contamination. That participant also commented that [the organization] American Rivers has included the Roanoke River in its list of most endangered rivers. Several participants expressed concern that a uranium mining and milling operation would reduce the supply of water from private wells and pollute private wells.

One participant questioned the potential impact of a uranium mine and mill on the water level at Smith Mountain Lake; and the effect that would have on property values, boating safety, tourism, and fisheries. In her comments the participant stated that the uranium mine and mill project at Coles Hill would use 5 billion gallons of water, lowering the water table, and impacting 250 wells within a 3 mile radius. Those affected would look up stream for a potential source of water and, in the event of contamination of surface waters downstream, additional demand would be placed on upstream water sources.

Several participants raised concerns over water samples collected for a private well owned by a local resident. One participant stated that the local resident noticed that some contaminant levels rose during testing of his well and that the local resident was informed that his water was not safe to drink.

Other comments, concerns, and questions in regards to water quality included:

* One participant commented that Halifax County would bear the brunt of any spill in the Banister River, and that the Virginia Beach study claimed the Banister River would be dead for 80,000 years if 1/3 of one cell containing uranium tailings breaks loose.
* Another participant commented that water samples from his well, similar to the previously mentioned local resident, got worse over time, and that when workers collecting the samples were offered a drink of water from his well they refused to drink it because of contamination.
* One participant commented that chemicals used in mining and milling operations would get into the water, that digging in the aquifer would impact her well, and that the amount of water needed for the project would diminish her supply.
* Another participant commented that wells and Lake Gaston will be polluted. She added that the when the NAS was questioned about the impact of a uranium mine and mill at Coles Hill on her private well located 20-plus miles away, they responded that the well will be impacted in all probability.
* One participant commented that the NAS study noted exploratory drilling in Wisconsin did cause issues. He further commented that individuals in the area of Coles Hill had issues with their wells during exploratory drilling.

Economic Comments, Concerns, and Questions

In addition to the comments about the potential impact on agriculture summarized above, participants expressed concern that uranium mining and milling would negatively impact tourism. One participant suggested that tourism brings in more money to the community than a uranium mine, referring to recreational activities available at Smith Mountain Lake, Leesville Lake, Buggs Island Lake, Lake Gaston, and other recreational venues in the region. A question was raised about who would have responsibility for water delivery if water in the area became contaminated; the speaker suggested that no money is available in local government budgets for this service. Another participant asked what would happen if Virginia Beach had to be shut down because of contamination of the Kerr Reservoir, and what impact would that have on businesses in Virginia Beach.

Baseline Testing and Monitoring Comments, Concerns, and Questions

Several participants expressed concern that baseline testing and monitoring of surface and ground water should be conducted now. One participant commented that a hydrologic study needs to be completed before lifting the moratorium is even considered. Another participant commented that surface water monitoring of Smith Mountain Lake and Leesville Lake needs to be conducted now. One participant asked if the Virginia Department of Health had the authority to require baseline studies over several years, and whether baseline studies encompass only normal operations of a uranium mining and milling facility or would include areas potentially affected by a catastrophic event.

Other comments, concerns, and questions in regards to baseline testing and monitoring included:

* The Virginia Department of Health should complete a detailed evaluation of the previously mentioned local resident’s well.
* How and when would residents be notified if water becomes contaminated?
* How will water quality be analyzed before and after construction?
* It is unwise for the Virginia Department of Health to use tax payer dollars to monitor recreational waters or wells; instead the Virginia Department of Health should be seeking to keep the moratorium.

Risk Assessment Comments, Concerns, and Questions

Many of the comments made during the public meeting suggested items that could be addressed during a risk assessment to determine the potential impacts of lifting the moratorium on uranium mining and milling in Virginia. One participant simply stated that it is not worth the risk. Another participant asked for an explanation of the risk assessment being conducted by state agencies.

VDH Authority Comments, Concerns, and Questions

Several comments and questions received during the course of the evening sought to identify the extent of the Virginia Department of Health’s authority to conduct monitoring of a uranium mine and mill. One participant asked if the Virginia Department of Health had the authority to establish a stakeholder group to develop baseline testing standards and the authority and budget to assist property owners with monitoring. Several participants commented that no regulations or safeguards can be put in place that would protect public health because there is no such thing as a “safe uranium mine.” One participant stated that the Virginia Department of Health cannot protect wells and surface waters, but can only condemn them if they become contaminated.

Several comments and questions were related to the authority of state agencies to sufficiently regulate uranium mining and milling activities. One person commented that Virginia is currently limiting the authority to regulate coal mining under the Clean Water Act. Another asked whether the state has the authority to regulate chemical, physical and radioactive contaminants in water, air and soil. One participant inquired about the extent of the health department’s authority to manage risk associated with uranium mining and milling.

Catastrophic Events and Operational Failure Comments, Concerns, and Questions

Many of the participants voiced concern that public and environmental health could not be protected from a catastrophic event or operational failure. One participant commented that there is no such thing as a safe containment liner. Another noted a history of volatile weather events in the area and referenced the effects of Hurricane Camille in 1969. Another participant commented that the proposed site at Coles Hill was covered in water in 1996. A comment was made that although the NRC discussed monitoring wells, monitoring wells will not provide any protection if there is a breach. A participant asked what the back-up plan would be for providing water in the event of water supply contamination due to the operation. Several participants commented that the initial uranium mine and mill at Coles Hill would be an experiment and that mistakes would be made.

Geology and Hydrology Comments, Concerns, and Questions

Many comments, concerns, and questions summarized above related to geology and hydrology. One participant commented that the J.P. Gannon (Virginia Tech) study noted fractures in the area of Coles Hill are connected. Another commented that the water table in the area of Coles Hill is shallow. One commented that the area had a net precipitation climate, which is unlike other areas where uranium is mined.

Other General Comments, Concerns, and Questions

Several comments did not fall within the previous groupings and may need to be forwarded to other members of the Uranium Working Group for evaluation. One participant commented that the soil percolation rate is poor around the Banister River. Another participant voiced concern that Virginia Uranium Incorporated did not provide the state with sample data that was collected from 80-plus wells in the Coles Hill area. Other general comments, concerns, and questions included:

* Comments from one participant stating that she had lost her husband, dog, and breast to cancer while uranium is still in the ground.
* One participant commented that participants at the meeting were not an obstacle to be hurdled over in a race to bring uranium mining and milling to Virginia.
* Another participant asked where is the market for uranium? She stated the market is in China.
* One participant commented that any level of radiation exposure is unacceptable.
* Another participant commented that, at a mine in Australian, uranium and thorium was detected in the air up to 8 miles away.

Written Comments

Additional written comments from participants were collected during this public meeting. The following is a summary of those comments received, and a scanned copy of those comments is attached.

* “I am 7 years old. I lost my home 4 years ago. I live on a farm. I have 2 dogs, cats, chickens, fish, cows and a mule named Casper. My new mom say [*sic*] we may have to move again. I love my new home and my animals. Please don’t let me lose my new home.”
* “I’ve lived in Pittsylvania County my entire life on a small farm. There I grew to learn family values and stick up for what I believed in, and when I found out five years ago uranium mining was trying to come in to my beloved county I was devastated. I’ve always wanted to raise my family here and give them the experience I received, but going to a northern Virginia school I may find that I want to plant my roots there rather than here. Only because I know the individuals up there know what is safe and stand up for what they believe.”
* “What type of radiological issues is the VDH looking for in private wells related to uranium mining and milling in Pittsylvania County, how will those issues be addressed, and what will VDH be considering that differs from the objectives of DEQ? What bacteriological issues would you expect to be resulting from the mining and milling of uranium?”
* “How much water will it take to complete the drilling process and how will the water be affected and for how long will the water be affected because of the drilling?”
* “I think these meetings should be held in a location that will accommodate the full complement of citizens that wish to attend.”
* “In a surface or ground water sample how is the ultimate source found for bacteria or any chemical contaminants?”

Several participants that spoke provided a transcript of their public comment, and one participant provided a set of news articles, publications, and electronic mailings. Those documents have also been included in the attachment.

Conclusion and Next Steps

At the conclusion of the meeting Dr. Maureen Dempsey, Chief Deputy Commissioner for Public Health, urged participants to continue to ask questions and make comments through mail or through the UWG website. The schedule of future meetings was provided to the participants, and Dr. Dempsey closed by thanking those in attendance for their participation.

The comments, concerns, and questions captured during the meeting were used by the facilitator to further discussion at the day-long discussion meeting in Chatham the following day.