Backers of legislation (SB 1353) to overturn Virginia's ban on uranium mining announced yesterday their intent to postpone an effort requiring the state's Department of Mines, Minerals, and Energy to create a permitting structure for extracting the ore. The bill's chief sponsor, Senator John Watkins, expressed frustration and disappointment during a committee hearing where it appeared the legislation did not have enough votes to pass.

For over 30 years Virginia has maintained a ban on mining uranium ore, however a proposal by a private company - Virginia Uranium Inc. - to access one of the largest undeveloped sources in rural Pittsylvania County had policymakers at the local and state level reconsidering the moratorium. According to the company, underneath its property at the Coles Hill farm lies 119 million pounds of uranium that could provide nearly $5 billion in economic activity, over 1,000 jobs, and help address the shortage of domestic uranium needed to refuel the country's 104 nuclear reactors. In 2010, the United States imported 92 percent of the uranium used to fuel its nuclear power plants according to a report issued by the National Research Council that also examined larger regulatory and safety issues associated with uranium mining in Virginia.

A coalition of opponents that included environmental and agricultural groups as well as localities on both sides of the Virginia/North Carolina border expressed very strong reservations with the overturning the multi-decade ban over concerns that uranium mining would harm local water supplies and surrounding watersheds that feed into the Roanoke River. The river is also a major source of drinking water for the Raleigh, North Carolina metropolitan area in addition to local communities in Virginia, and activists' major concern is that residual waste and heavy metals called "tailings" that are stored on site in impoundments could flood and spread radioactive contamination across the basin.

Moving forward, Virginia Uranium is now urging Governor Bob McDonnell's administration to begin proceedings under the state's Administrative Process Act for the promulgation of mining regulations in order to address safety concerns raised by their opponents. Although the Governor has been a supporter of nuclear power, he has not issued a firm opinion in support or opposition to lifting the state's ban.
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