A Call for a Continued Moratorium on Uranium Mining and Milling in Virginia

The Holy Bible is clear that we are to be good stewards of creation and not pollute our neighborhoods, the planet, and the poor. [Genesis 2:15, Isaiah 24, Jeremiah 4:2&7, Micah 6:6-8 and Matthew 22:36-40]

Uranium mining and milling in Virginia will threaten the land, water, health of our people for generations to come, as well as that of communities near the mine site. The threats from proposals to mine and mill uranium in Virginia, were well debated by the people of our state in the 1970’s and 1980’s.

The Virginia Annual Conference in 1981 passed a resolution, which called on the Virginia General Assembly to impose a statewide moratorium on uranium mining and milling in Virginia. The Virginia General Assembly passed moratorium legislation in 1982.

Now the possibility of uranium mining and milling is being debated anew, but we should pursue other ways of supplying our energy needs.

In 2008, The United Methodist Church General Conference called for an end to uranium milling in its resolution on “Energy“ and for the greatest efforts to be in conservation and renewable energy. ²

The Virginia Conference in 2008 voted that the major effort in energy policy should be in supporting energy conservation and renewable energy. The average Virginia electricity consumer is currently using nearly 14,500kw of electricity a year. This is 2000 kW more than the national average.³ Greater electricity conservation could reduce the need for more electricity from nuclear and other electricity sources.

The Virginia Conference has installed solar panels on the conference center and is working with its churches through the Green Church initiative to model energy efficiency and the use of renewable resources. More than 100 Virginia United Methodist congregations now have “green” teams in their churches that are encouraging energy conservation measures.

The 2008 session of the General Assembly defeated a bill to allow the establishment of regulations for uranium mining and milling. Nevertheless, despite this vote, later in 2008, the Virginia Coal and Energy Commission voted funds for a study of the feasibility of uranium mining and milling in Virginia. Governor McDonnell has directed state officials
to conduct a review of uranium mining, but his review committee, while accepting public comments, has declined to hold public meetings. The group will report to the Governor in late 2012.

Uranium has never been mined in the eastern U.S., and research shows that it has never been safely done anywhere in the world in a humid climate such as ours with our heavy rains and hurricanes. Many of the more than 4000 mines sites in the Western United States have been designated Superfund sites by the EPA.

If the moratorium were lifted, it would permit mining of uranium anywhere in Virginia. Seams of uranium bearing rock stretch from Fairfax County in Northern Virginia to close to the North Carolina border. In the 1980s, uranium leases were filed on thousands of acres of land in Virginia counties stretching along the Piedmont from Fauquier to Pittsylvania.

The possibility of lifting the ban has prompted water utilities to commission reports on the potential threat to their drinking water. A Virginia Beach study found that even a small breach in mine waste ponds or containers could contaminate its drinking water. Radioactive water from the Coles Hill site could reach residents of Southside Virginia, Hampton Roads, and North Carolina. A Fairfax County study found that mining in a site in Northern Virginia would pollute the Occoquan watershed and the Potomac watershed making it impossible for the County to provide safe drinking water from existing reservoirs.

Tremendous uranium mining site problems exist in many areas of the world. Uranium mining and milling sites in Australia, France, Germany, the Czech Republic and many other countries have been linked to serious harms to human health and the environment. Concern in the Western United States about the link between leukemia and other cancers and uranium mill tailings propelled the passage of legislation requiring the Uranium Mill Tailings Remediation Program (UMTRA). This UMTRA program focused specifically on uranium tailings piles in sites mainly in the central western states. In many places, tailings had been placed in unbounded or poorly bounded piles on level to gently sloping ground. Several piles were within city limits and along or close to riverbanks. Dust dispersion of the tailings, and re-use by the community as construction sand and fill, gave rise to significant health risks.

There is no reason for mining in Virginia ever to begin, much less lead to the kinds of problems found among the thousands of mining sites in the West and around the world. A major interdisciplinary study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has found that there is no shortage of uranium in the U.S. and the U.S. has large stockpiles of enriched uranium, which can be down blended for uses other than in nuclear weapons.

Even the political leaders of Western states that have long benefited from uranium mining jobs, now view most of the jobs created as being jobs to clean up pollution from the mines and are opposing expansion of mines in the West. US Interior Secretary Salazar has proposed a 20-year moratorium on new mines in watersheds near the Grand
Canyon. In the very center of uranium mining in the West, tourism is now worth more than mines. Likewise, tourism and other industries in Virginia could lose more jobs than the mines would provide.

In the Social Principles of the United Methodist Church, paragraph 160, I, The Natural World, we read: *Water, air, soil, minerals, energy resources, plants, animal life, and space are to be valued and conserved because they are God’s creation and not solely, because they are useful to human beings. God has granted us stewardship of creation. We should meet these stewardship duties through acts of loving care and respect.*

Therefore,

Let us recognize the responsibility of the church and its members to place a high priority on changes in our economic, political, social and technological lifestyle to support a more ecologically equitable and sustainable world leading to a high quality of life for all of God’s creation.

We call upon Governor Robert McDonnell and the members of the Virginia General Assembly, to maintain the moratorium prohibiting any mining or milling of uranium in Virginia, as there is no evidence in the intervening years of uranium mining and milling having been done safely in areas as humid as is Virginia. We call for any state government discussions about lifting the moratorium to be in open meetings that include public testimony.

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1 Note this is a revision of the 2011 resolution that was given to the Board of Church and Society for its review when the Annual Conference was unable to complete its votes on all resolutions.


3 U.S. Per Capita Electricity Use By State In 2010 [http://energy.almanac.ca.gov/electricity/us_per_capita_electricity-2010.html](http://energy.almanac.ca.gov/electricity/us_per_capita_electricity-2010.html)


10 The United Methodist Church, The Book of Discipline, 2008.