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Uranium

Search Splits Orange, Spurs Study

By Richard E. Gordon
Times-Dispatch State Staff

Bill Speiden and Sam Funkhouser generally see eye to eye, but uranium has split them.

Both men, who operate family farms on gently rolling land a few miles west of the town of Orange, say they are concerned about the environment. As members of the Orange County Planning Commission, Speiden and Funkhouser both supported measures to preserve the county's agricultural base.

Funkhouser, however, is one of eight Orange landowners who have signed a uranium lease with Marline Uranium Corp., a New York-based energy firm that has acquired such leases on about 50,000 acres in the state.

"I believe in nuclear generation," Funkhouser, 55, said last week as he took a short break from plowing. "It [uranium] has to be dug someplace. If this is an economical place to dig it and it can be done safely, I would have no objection."

Speiden, 43, also was approached by Marline representatives. But after a trip last summer to uranium mines and mills in Colorado and New Mexico, he finally said he wasn't interested in signing a lease.

"We didn't know a thing about uranium mining," Speiden said last week as he sat in the living room of his home with his wife, Sandra. "The more we learned, the more we got scared about it."

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EACH POINT of view will be presented this week before the Virginia Coal and Energy Commission as that body begins a study on uranium-mining issues. The commission has been asked by the General Assembly to evaluate the environmental and health effects of uranium operations and to determine whether any additional state regulations would be useful.

Speiden, a Cornell University graduate who, with his wife, has collected mountains of information about uranium-mining and milling, will express his concerns at the commission's public hearing Tuesday. Marline also is expected to make a presentation.

Del. George P. Beard Jr., R-Culpeper, represents the residents of Orange County and was the sponsor of the House resolution calling for the uranium study. His concern, he said last week, stems from a lack of knowledge about uranium mining. Uranium has never been commercially mined in the United States east of the Mississippi River, said Robert Pitman, a federal uranium expert.

"WE DON'T KNOW ANYTHING about it. We don't know whether it's dangerous or non-dangerous," Beard said. "We want to find out more about uranium and whether it needs to be regulated."

Uranium mining has already been an issue in other states. In New Jersey, after several companies began acquiring uranium leases, four towns adopted bans on exploration, mining and milling.

The New Jersey Legislature then passed a bill that banned such activities for seven years while the state Department of Environmental Protection studies the issue and makes recommendations about what regulatory actions, if any, should be taken. New Jersey Gov. Brendan Byrne has until Tuesday to sign or veto the bill.

In Minnesota, after seven companies obtained uranium leases on more than 140,000 acres, the Legislature ordered a study of state regulations that would govern uranium exploration, mining and milling. The staff of the state Environmental Quality Review Board, which conducted the study, has recommended that the state enact comprehensive guidelines and regulations to deal with uranium.

"WE RECOGNIZE that there are a lot of laws presently in place, but there have to be a number of regulations developed specifically for uranium," Charles Kenow, assistant manager of the Minnesota board's program analysis and environmental review section, said in a telephone interview.

Kenow said he will testify at Tuesday's hearing to inform

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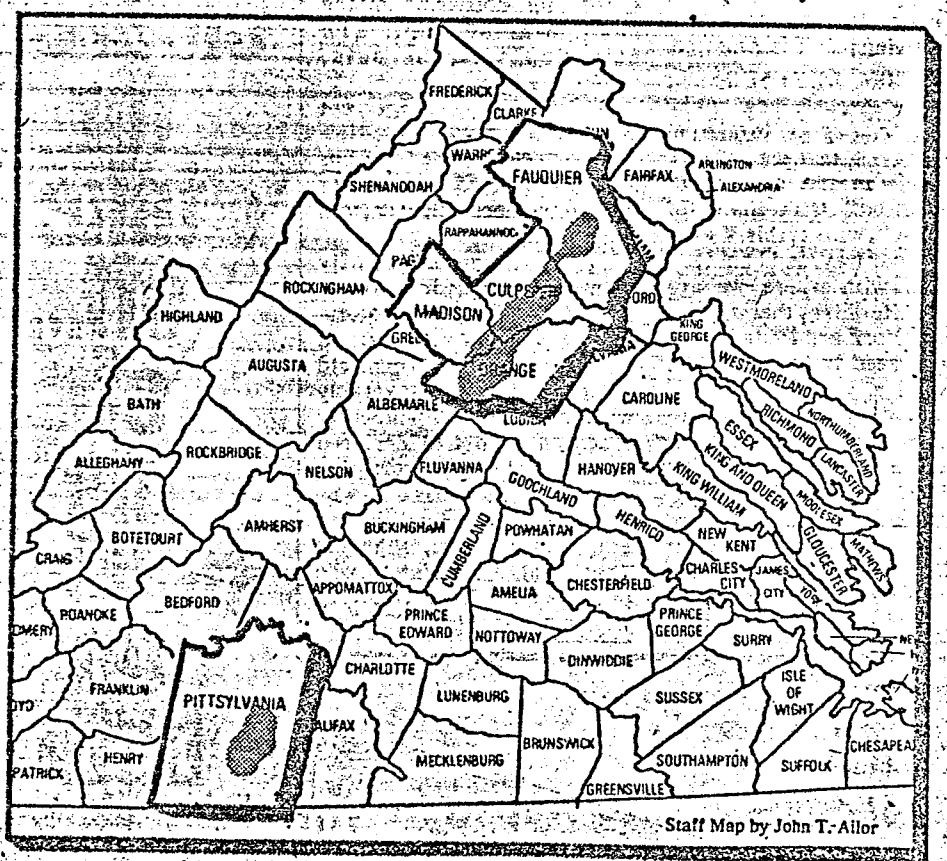

Staff Map by John T. Allor

Shaded Areas Indicate Exploration for Uranium Deposits