The Struggle over the Future of Nuclear Energy

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by

Silas Agnew

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

Silas Agnew

STS Advisor: Peter Norton

Introduction

Divergent interests, environmental values, and perceptions of public safety divide social groups' positions on nuclear power, and can turn allies into adversaries. Some environmentalists favor it as an alternative to fossil fuels, which accelerate global warming, but others consider nuclear power an environmental hazard. With the average age of operating nuclear reactors in the U.S. nearing half a century, Virginia being no outlier, the nuclear power issue may seem to be fading into irrelevance (EIA, 2024). Despite the lack of new reactors, in 2022, nuclear power supplied 31% of Virginia's total in-state electricity generation (U.S. EIA, 2024). Because nuclear energy is typically not classified as a renewable energy source, it is generally not perceived as environmentally sustainable. However, within the past decade, there has been a movement in Virginia to turn back to it. This dichotomy reveals tension in how it is viewed by influential participants. Large companies, including Amazon, Virginia's major utility providers, and nuclear technology manufacturers, are investing in new ways to deploy nuclear energy in Virginia. The governor has also promoted these investments. Energy companies, tech businesses, researchers, and environmentalists have competed over the extent to which nuclear energy will be developed and used in Virginia. Advocates have reignited interest in nuclear energy by highlighting its potential to drive economic growth and reduce carbon emissions, while critics emphasize the high costs and environmental risks that make it an inadequate solution for both the environment and local communities.

Review of Research

Researchers have investigated this situation in Virginia and elsewhere. In their research of Southwest Virginia residents' position on nuclear energy developments, Gurley (2023) observed that "the residents of coal country who have borne those environmental and social burdens for decades are now faced with another extractive scheme" and are not on board with it. Some citizens express sentiments consistent with the social concept titled "not in my backyard syndrome" (NIMBY). Azusa Uji, has examined how NIMBY syndrome affects support for nuclear power in Japan. They anticipated that NIMBY would contribute to public opposition to nuclear projects, especially given the Fukushima disaster which occurred in Japan near the time of their study. Contrasting with their expectation, they found that even though "Nuclear energy is often portrayed as a victim of the NIMBY syndrome… low-income people actually support restarting nuclear reactors when they live in proximity to a nuclear plant". They observed this most often in citizens who were educated on the low local air pollution of nuclear plants compared to other power plants. Their results indicated that "emphasizing *local* co-benefits, particularly health benefits (as opposed to macro benefits of climate protection or cheaper electricity) can increase support for policies that solve global commons problems" (Uji, 2021).

While the Fukushima disaster had a mild effect on Japanese public opinion of nuclear, it had a major effect on German energy policy. Jahn Detlef researched the history of Germany's nuclear energy policies. In Germany, the Atomic Energy Act "provided the platform upon which the nuclear industry developed virtually unhindered by any political opposition for nearly 20 years. A powerful nuclear infrastructure was established, involving state-funded research centers, a nuclear construction industry and electricity utilities committed to a nuclear future". Detlef observed that "the nuclear power conflict was also a major reason for the establishment of one of

the strongest Green parties in the world". The Green Party was established and opposed nuclear, "ultimately resulting in the [Social Democratic Party] SDP's shift from a pro-nuclear power position in 1979 to its 1986 decision to abandon nuclear power within 10 years". This phasing-out plan was delayed to maintain energy independence while pursuing reduced CO2 emissions. Germany remained divided on the issue until the Fukushima disaster struck and tipped the balance away from nuclear and in favor of the Green Party. Detlef's research showed how the Green Party has worked toward the eventual phase-out of nuclear power. This study also highlighted the wide range of responses from different countries to nuclear disasters (Detlef, 2012).

Sonja Schmid performed research "on the role of scientific authority, and of institutional inertia, for dealing with the fundamental challenges posed by the Chernobyl accident and the disintegration of the Soviet Union." The article focused on contrasting the "efforts by Soviet scientists and engineers in the 1950s and 1960s, who successfully persuaded planners to support expensive, still unproven nuclear technologies, and to establish a nuclear industry from scratch, with contemporary efforts by nuclear energy advocates to maintain at least a sliver of relevance for nuclear power in the carbon-friendly energy mix of the 21st century". The contemporary efforts involved organizing the Federal Agency for Atomic Energy (Rosatom) to rebuild the nuclear industry. One of their strategies was to prepare specialists for the industry by having "the former Moscow Engineering Physics Institute in 2008 rebrand itself as National Nuclear Research University". Schmid observed that Rosatom has fostered "the unwavering belief that nuclear energy will help societies progress". They concluded that even while the economic viability of the nuclear industry is uncertain, if "nuclear energy fits the mold of a socially

transformative technology", the Federal Agency for Atomic Energy will continue to plan a "bright nuclear future" (Schmid, 2018).

Advocates Organize Themselves

In 2013, Delegate T. Scott Garret, R-Lynchburg, introduced House Bill 1790 which would create the Virginia Nuclear Energy Consortium Authority (VNECA) (Virginia Business, 2013). Garrett was motivated by BWX Technologies and Framatome Inc., which both have major locations in Lynchburg. BWX Technologies is a nuclear components supplier that "is revolutionizing reactors and fuels to provide next-generation capabilities for life on Earth and exploration across the universe" (BWX Technologies, 2025). Framatome has also "been designing and manufacturing high-performance components, fuels, and instrumentation & control (I&C) systems for all types of nuclear reactors for more than 60 years" (Framatome, 2023). Senator Jeffrey McWaters, R-Virginia Beach, sponsored the companion legislation; Senate Bill 1138. These bills established a board, composed mostly of members appointed by the Governor, who was charged with founding the Virginia Nuclear Energy Consortium (VNEC). April Wade, executive director of VNEC, describes his organization's origins saying that VNECA was directed "to establish a nonprofit entity, basically the working arm … Our goal is to sustain the Commonwealth's global leadership in nuclear energy through business development, research, workforce development and training, and advocacy for the nuclear industry" (Koubi, 2023). VNEC represents its stakeholder members, including Appalachian Power, Dominion Energy, Framatome, GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy, UVA, VCU, and VT (VNEC, 2019).

The formation of the authority generated controversy immediately because of the future investment in nuclear power that it implied. Due to the unique structure of the consortium and

the authority, VNEC would not be subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The legislators justified this with concerns that some organizations would not join public meetings and are protective of trade secrets. Megan Rhyne, executive director of the Virginia Coalition for Open Government, points out that "the release of trade secret information is certainly reasonable, and there are exemptions within FOIA to deal with that. They can certainly protect that information without exempting the entire body from FOIA". Rhyne argued that "they are spending taxpayer dollars and advising a public body, and those kinds of organizations and entities need to be subject to sunshine [FOIA]". Advocates for the consortium replied that VNEC needed more flexibility than other government agencies to achieve Gov. McDonnell's energy goals (Virginia Business, 2013).

VNEC has been influential as it "seeks to promote the benefits of nuclear energy and opportunities available for public and private entities to develop partnerships to advance the industry and the commonwealth" (VNEC, 2019). They created and submitted the *Virginia is Nuclear Strategic Plan* to the Commonwealth and "provided recommendations for the Governor's 2019 Virginia Energy Plan in coordination with the Virginia Nuclear Energy Consortium Authority" (VNEC, 2025). The strategic plan resulted from 2020 legislation which directed several departments to work with VNECA "to develop a strategic plan for the role of nuclear energy in the Commonwealth's overall strategy for moving toward carbon-free energy" (commerce). They highlight Virginia's "unparalleled strategic advantage in nuclear energy and related technologies" and outline how this advantage can "promote Virginia's leadership in nuclear energy solutions for the world's pressing energy, economic, environmental, and national security needs" (VNEC, 2020). While signing a bill into law that would allow Dominion to adjust rates to help absorb small modular reactor (SMR) development costs, Governor Youngkin

indicated his support for the strategic plan by stating that "small modular nuclear reactors will play a critical role in harnessing this potential and positioning Virginia to be a leading nuclear innovation hub… Together, our potential to unleash and foster a rich energy economy for Virginians is limitless" (Finocchio, 2024). Concepts from VNEC's strategic plan and other initiatives have continued to appear in statements by politicians and business executives, demonstrating the consortium's influence in promoting nuclear energy.

Nuclear Promoted

Many tech companies favor nuclear energy as a key to clean energy without curtailing energy consumption. They are interested in Virginia's energy profile and capacity because "70% of internet IP traffic is either created or passes through Loudoun County's "Data Center Alley," making Ashburn the epicenter for global interconnection" (VEDP, 2019). A data center's massive power demand often requires companies to coordinate with utilities to develop the necessary infrastructure before building one. Amazon recently agreed to invest $500 million into three energy companies, including Dominion Energy, to develop small modular reactors (SMRs) (ANS, 2024). Matt Garman, CEO of Amazon Web Services, claimed that "Nuclear is a safe source of carbon-free energy that can help power our operations and meet the growing demands of our customers while helping us progress toward our Climate Pledge commitment to be net-zero carbon across our operations by 2040" (Amazon Staff, 2024). By associating AWS's ambitions with climate goals, Garman protects his energy-intensive company from its environmentalist critics. He claims that one of the fastest ways to address climate change "is by transitioning our society to carbon-free energy sources, and nuclear energy is both carbon-free

and able to scale—which is why it's an important area of investment for Amazon" (Amazon Staff, 2024).

Virginia's primary energy suppliers also claim nuclear is key to producing clean energy to protect the environment. Robert M. Blue, Chair, President, and CEO of Dominion Energy said "This agreement builds on our longstanding partnership with Amazon and other leading tech companies to accelerate the development of carbon-free power generation in Virginia" (Dominion Energy, 2024). Speaking of their plans to develop SMRs, the president of Appalachian Power (AP), Aaron Walker said "Appalachian Power is committed to generating clean, always-on power to meet Virginia's future demand" (AP, 2023). AP has a page on their website dedicated to SMRs where they state that "demand for reliable, clean energy is growing across the country and the Commonwealth. To meet this demand, Appalachian Power is exploring the development of a small modular reactor in Virginia" (AP, 2025).

These promoters of nuclear have secured bipartisan support among some state legislators. These legislators have introduced bills that would cement nuclear as an accepted option for the future of clean energy. One example is a bill that allows Dominion to adjust rates to help absorb the costs of developing SMRs, which was passed in 2023. While presenting her bill to classify nuclear as a renewable source of energy, Del. Kathy Byron, R-Bedford, stated that "we all know that we are progressing towards an emission-free environment," and claimed that "In order to do that, and make sure that we have a baseload to be able to supply the energy needs that are out there, we are going to need to ensure that we include nuclear and advanced nuclear technology" (Paullin, 2023). Del. Danny Marshall, R-Danville, also presented a bill to create an SMR pilot program to encourage SMR development at several locations in Virginia. Democratic Senator Tim Kaine said in response to the agreement between Amazon and Dominion, "I will continue to

do all that I can to make sure we are harnessing that opportunity, including by encouraging other companies to utilize the clean energy incentives in the Inflation Reduction Act that I'm proud to have helped pass" (Amazon Staff, 2024).

These proponents also claim that Virginia citizens should expect reliability, affordability, and economic growth from nuclear energy. Bill Fehrman, CEO and president of AEP, for which Appalachian Power is a subsidiary, said, "SMR technology is a key component to providing perfect power to our customers. Appalachian Power and AEP are committed to working with our states to develop energy solutions that align with state policy goals and reliably serve our customers," (AP, 2023) Responding to frustration from citizens about being left out of the nuclear conversation, AEP hosted a community open house in December 2024 to answer questions and concerns about the planned project. The AEP Vice President of Projects and Services said at the meeting, "We want to be transparent and we want to share what's going on at the facility" (Johnson, 2024). In an interview with CNBC TV, Robert Blue says Dominion's plans with Amazon are "a way to provide exactly what our customers want; reliable, carbon-free electricity and in a way that benefits not just Amazon and not just Dominion Energy, but all of our customers" (CNBC TV, 2024). Governor Glenn Youngkin has shown public support for these plans by saying "it puts us on the path to become, not just the first state, but one of the states that will benefit from affordable, reliable and increasingly clean power from small modular reactors going forward," (Gad, 2024). The Green Energy Partners (GEP) is a renewable energy company based in Virginia that claims nuclear will enable them to create new jobs. They have plans to build, adjacent to Surry Power Station, what they call the "Green Energy Center" which is a group of sixteen "Data Centers that are powered by green energy on-site" (GEP, 2023). GEP plans to "spend $6.45bn building out the campus over the next 13 years, creating up to 3,000

jobs" (Gooding, 2024), saying that "together with the most innovative green technology companies we will create green energy, jobs and a healthier environment". They claim they will accomplish this by having the data centers initially "powered from existing grid resources, [Surry Power Station], with the revenue they generate then used to develop the small modular reactors" (GEP, 2023).

Advocates have directed their efforts towards SMRs to dodge some known drawbacks of large nuclear plants. The US Department of Energy claimed, "Advanced SMRs offer many advantages, such as relatively small physical footprints, reduced capital investment, ability to be sited in locations not possible for larger nuclear plants, and provisions for incremental power additions" (Energy.gov, 2025). In a press release on their Request for Proposals (RFP) from potential SMR manufacturers, Dominion claims "SMRs have the same reliability and environmental benefits as traditional nuclear, but with a significantly smaller footprint and lower upfront capital costs" (Dominion Energy, 2024). To reassure citizens near a proposed project site that SMRs are safe, AEP Vice President of Projects and Services, Shane Lies, said, "At a nuclear plant. Our first job is not to generate electricity. Our first job is to protect the health and safety of the public, and that's going to be the same with this small modular reactor". He implies that SMRs are safer by pointing out that "the emergency planning zone is right at the site boundary. So there would be no larger emergency planning zone that would impact the community" (Johnson, 2024). President and CEO of BWX Technologies, Rex Geveden, responds to the claims that SMRs are unproven by referencing the Navy. He points out that reactors on submarines and aircraft carriers "haven't been historically called small modular reactors, but … they're really the same thing because we build those at BWXT in our plants and our factories … so they are factory-built nuclear reactors and they're on that scale" (Cameron, 2022). Though

there are only four commercial nuclear power reactors in Virginia, at any given time, there are generally tens of these small nuclear reactors in the water at Virginia ports.

Nuclear Opposed

Many environmental groups claim that nuclear energy is misrepresented and distracts from better solutions. The Sierra Club is an influential environmental group, with an active Virginia chapter, that opposes nuclear energy as an environmental hazard. On their webpage titled "Nuclear Free Future" they make it clear that they are "unequivocally opposed to nuclear energy. Although nuclear plants have been in operation for less than 60 years, we now have seen three serious disasters" (Sierra Club, 2025). In 2013, Glen Besa, senior director of the Sierra Club's Virginia chapter, protested the founding of the VNEC by saying, "there's been several studies out that have shown we can get by and meet our energy needs with wind, solar and energy efficiency". He contends that investigating nuclear energy detracts from these more environmentally friendly options. Erica Gray, who organized the Richmond chapter of Nuclear Free Virginia, agreed, highlighting the issue of nuclear waste by saying, "We need to invest in renewable energy – things that don't produce toxic waste that we have nowhere to put". Besa argued that "If they [VNEC] want to study anything, they ought to figure out what to do with the nuclear waste," since, as he puts it, the Surry and North Anna stations are "high level" nuclear waste dumps (Virginia Business, 2013). Connor Kish, legislative and political director for the Virginia chapter of the Sierra Club, also argued that it would diminish utilities' incentive to invest in traditional renewables like wind and solar (Paullin, 2023).

Some local citizen groups criticize those making SMR plans for forcing their plans without discussion. Peter Anderson, director of energy policy in Virginia for the Appalachian

Voices, works to make sure Appalachians are included in the transition to a clean energy economy. Addressing Dominion's SMR plans, Anderson said that "to be focused on a speculative, zero-carbon technology that has never been deployed before, rather than focusing our resources on overcoming the existing issues with bringing more wind and solar and battery storage online, is to gamble with their ratepayers' money" (Bolster, 2024). The president of Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards, responded to the plan by saying "If those living in our communities are excluded from decision-making about our future, how can we be expected to trust and accept the choices foisted upon us from Richmond and beyond?" (Radmacher, 2022). The president of the Clinch Coalition, Sharon Fisher, voiced her frustration that "[The governor] came, announced it, and said we're doing it" without engaging at all with those it would affect" (Gurley, 2023). This opposition indicates that the citizens have not been convinced that SMRs would benefit their communities.

Groups opposing nuclear power have often pointed out safety concerns and high investment without a guaranteed return. Dominion worked over the fourteen years from 2003 to 2017 to acquire a license to build a third full-scale unit at Lake Anna and subsequently put a hold on the project (U.S.NRC, 2024). The executive director of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network and a critic of nuclear power plant development, Mike Tidwell, said, "Dominion is clearly realizing its bet on more nuclear in Virginia was a colossal mistake and waste of ratepayer subsidies" (Pierobon, 2017). Erica Gray, nuclear issues chair for the Virginia chapter of the Sierra Club raised the safety and investment concerns that "this reactor would be built on an existing fault line… [and] it is a new reactor design that has never been built and operated commercially" (SCVC, 2024). This safety concern led to the formation of a new alliance, named

"Not on our Fault Line", echoing the NIMBY idea discussed in Uji's research, devoted to opposing the construction of the third unit (SCVC, 2024).

As nuclear supporters proposed SMRs as the solution to slow, expensive development, the opposition has doubled down on the same points. The Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC), a nonprofit environmental legal advocacy, lobbied against the bill introduced by Marshall to create the SMR pilot program. In an urgent call to action to Virginia citizens, SELC drew attention to the fact that the bill "removes existing customer protections to provide preferential treatment to SMRs — a technology that is completely unproven for commercial electricity generation" (SELC, 2024). Appalachian Voices, an environmental publication, also opposed this bill, pointing out that development costs will be high and that "sadly, customers in South Carolina had to pay $2.9 billion for a failed nuclear project just a few years ago" (AV, 2024). The Virginia Conservation Network posted an "Opposition Talking Points" document addressing the bill that would add nuclear to the renewable energy profile. They claim that this legislation is not needed because "nuclear energy does not need to be supported by RECs". They say that in the future, utilities "will be more likely to choose new nuclear—an expensive and risky proposition that would erode resource diversity and increase costs to ratepayers" (VCN, 2024).

Conclusion

With its high development costs, history of high-consequence disasters, and unsolved radioactive waste issue, nuclear energy was not the natural place to look for Virginia's future energy policy. However, the advocates have organized themselves to promote nuclear under a united set of benefits. Detlef's research on Germany's energy policy showed how the highly

organized Green Party was able to accomplish a similar feat with the opposite goal. These advocates were able to gain bipartisan support by claiming that their cause aligns with the goals of environmental groups to reduce carbon emissions. They have also adapted their strategies toward supporting SMRs to separate this new movement from the faded image of the 1970s nuclear industry. They should, however, learn from Uji's research to better reach citizen communities by emphasizing local benefits more than the possible global scale benefits. The opposition put forward a less united effort which resulted in a smaller impact, as evidenced by the continued development of the movement. These groups took a more reactive approach by calling on citizens to oppose legislation that was already introduced and on its way to approval. This case demonstrated the power of joining forces to proactively shape the way a controversial technology is viewed.

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