

Youngkin Casts Doubt on Building Small Nuclear Reactor in Southwest Virginia

Morgan Sweeney
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(The Center Square) — After months of research and investigation into what it would look like to build a small modular nuclear reactor in Southwest Virginia, Gov. Glenn Youngkin revealed the region may not be selected for Virginia’s first SMR after all.

“There may be other places around Virginia that may be better suited for the first one,” Youngkin said. “We’re looking at places across the commonwealth. I do firmly believe that Virginia will be the first state to have a small modular reactor in a commercial fashion.”

Youngkin first shared his vision of Virginia being a pioneer in the small modular reactor market and building the nation’s first commercial SMR within 10 years in October 2022. He suggested Southwest Virginia as the location for the nascent energy technology, partly because the region needs ventures to replace the dying coal industry. While he noted that it’s still a possibility the first SMR could be built in Southwest Virginia, it sounded less likely.

“As of today, the site work and all of that has really been focused on spots other than in Southwest Virginia, and the primary reason for that is there’s been a couple that have really put their hand up and said, ‘We can run fast,’” Youngkin said.

Youngkin has marketed his energy plan in deep purple Virginia as an “all-of-the-above” approach that will embrace green energy production as much as possible without compromising the grid’s reliability. Supporters of small modular nuclear reactors say they could be a source of dependable energy production that is also zero-emission.

However, there are a few concerns. Some worry about the uranium waste the reactors generate and the disposal process. There’s also the expense of getting the industry off the ground.

The Center Square reported on the venture when Youngkin first announced his plans, and David Kemp, a research analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, expressed skepticism at the time. Kemp explained that “nuclear power is not cost competitive with coal or natural gas because ‘construction costs are astronomical.’”

“Most people are being a little bit overly optimistic about their viability,” Kemp had said.

Regardless, Youngkin and others will continue to pursue bringing commercial SMRs to Virginia. Dominion Energy is looking to incorporate SMR into its future power portfolio.

Duane Miller, the executive director of the LENOWISCO (Lee, Scott and Wise counties and the city of Norton) Planning District Commission, remains optimistic about SMR’s chances in Southwest.

“The governor said that Southwest Virginia may not be the location for the first SMR, but we are still full force ahead to be able to have an SMR located in Southwest Virginia,” Miller told The Center Square. “If the commonwealth can lead in SMR deployment, then that’s a great thing. You may not be first, but as long as we can still be a consideration, I think everything’s still full speed ahead.”

Miller also emphasized that Southwest Virginia can still be a vital part of that supply chain no matter where SMRs are built – whether in Virginia or even globally. Youngkin spoke to that as well.

“Southwest Virginia has advanced manufacturing capability.... It’s really well-suited to be home to a big piece of that supply chain as this industry grows. There’s a really clear understanding that there are going to be hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of thousands of good-paying jobs that are gonna be part of the manufacturing supply chain for small modular reactors, and I sure hope we can work on getting some of that here in Southwest Virginia,” the governor said.