

Press Release from The Clinch Coalition
For Immediate Release

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Photo caption: A potential nuclear facility proposed by Southwest Virginia officials in a recent feasibility study as being able to house “multiple” reactors sits a mere 800 feet from the Wise County Christian School.

The Clinch Coalition stands with Southwest Virginians calling for increased transparency and public input in nuclear energy proposals, releases resource library on small modular nuclear reactors

WISE, VIRGINIA — Last month, Southwest Virginia’s LENOWISCO Planning District announced the results of a [feasibility study](#) outlining seven potential sites for nuclear reactors in Wise, Lee, and Scott Counties, as well as the City of Norton. The report follows months of efforts, led by Governor Glenn Youngkin and other elected officials, to promote the development of small modular nuclear reactors, or SMRs, in Southwest Virginia.

Much like earlier announcements in Southwest Virginia related to SMRs, the LENOWISCO study was conducted with minimal input from local residents and no opportunity for the general public to inform the selection of potential nuclear reactor facilities. Instead, LENOWISCO’s report mentioned that only ten individuals from a select group of stakeholders provided input for the study, with the study’s “community engagement questionnaire” lacking any items specifically asking respondents about possible safety issues or environmental impacts associated with locating nuclear reactors in Southwest Virginia’s communities.

Despite officials’ [earlier assurances to the press](#) that Southwest Virginia’s nuclear sites were “not going to be near anybody’s backyard,” the LENOWISCO report proposed numerous potential nuclear facilities within populated areas, including the City of Norton’s business district. Several potential reactor sites are [within feet of schools, churches, businesses, and residential neighborhoods](#), with one site located only 800 feet from the Wise County Christian School.

Proposing sites for nuclear facilities within local communities represents a major shift in public policy and civic planning for Southwest Virginia. These types of proposals should not be taken lightly, nor should they be made without first seeking robust public input.

As an example, SMRs carry with them important questions about the handling of nuclear waste and the potential safety risks related to the storage and transport of that waste. A [May 2022 Stanford University study](#) even found that SMRs may increase the amount of hazardous radioactive waste in need of disposal when compared to conventional reactors. Would such waste need to be stored on-site within feet of our churches, schools, and neighborhoods? Or would it be transported through our communities on our highways and railroads? Officials either will not or cannot answer those questions, nor have they given the public any opportunity to

voice their concerns prior to publishing reports proposing potential nuclear facilities near our homes.

The Clinch Coalition (TCC) is disappointed to see officials forging ahead with planning for SMRs without any effort to first seek public input. Residents of Southwest Virginia have long been asked to bear the environmental and social burdens of energy development, often without meaningful opportunities to inform decisions about energy projects that impact their communities and livelihoods. Efforts to develop nuclear energy projects that exclude the voices of local residents do nothing to create a resilient new economy for Southwest Virginia. Instead, they perpetuate an exclusive, “members only” model of economic planning that prioritizes corporate profits over the region’s hardworking people and politics over realistic, sustainable growth.

To help fill the void of public information left in the wake of officials’ recent announcements about SMRs, TCC has developed an [online resource library](#) to help Southwest Virginia residents learn more about nuclear projects being planned for their communities. The library contains fact sheets on SMRs, 3D video tours showing the location of potential reactor sites listed in LENOWISCO’s recent feasibility study, and links to news articles and independent studies on SMRs. TCC will be updating the resource library as efforts to develop SMRs in Southwest Virginia continue.

In the meantime, TCC calls upon our local, regional, and state officials to model more effective civic leadership by seeking public input and making such input a core component of planning efforts for SMRs and other energy projects in Southwest Virginia. These efforts should place special focus on creating avenues to involve residents of the region’s underserved environmental justice communities in decision-making processes for energy policy in the region. Members of the public can also join nearly 500 others who have signed an [online petition](#) calling on officials to provide increased transparency and opportunities for public input in the region’s nuclear energy proposals.

TCC’s online resource library can be reached at <http://clinchcoalition.org/smrs>, with the online petition available at <https://chnng.it/zYnmsmKg>.

Statement by TCC President Sharon Fisher: “The Appalachian Peace Education Center and Southern Appalachian Mountain Stewards have joined The Clinch Coalition in our effort to raise public awareness of the environmental, safety and cost issues surrounding the push for SMRs in Southwest Virginia. Other environmental justice organizations in Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee have reached out to TCC to learn more about how the switch from coal to nuclear energy will impact their communities.”

Statement by TCC Vice President Wally Smith: “Over the past decade, Southwest Virginia has laid the groundwork for a new economy by placing community members in leadership roles and developing new projects around communities’ needs. It has been disappointing to watch that hard work be undone in a few short months by a closed-door approach that excludes everyday residents from the planning table and forces them to learn about major policy decisions from surprise press conferences. Developing nuclear energy projects in Southwest Virginia would

involve fundamental changes affecting each of our communities and their people. Our leaders should make decisions about such projects *with* our most vulnerable neighbors, not *for* them.”

About The Clinch Coalition

Founded in 1998, the mission of The Clinch Coalition is to “protect and preserve the forest, wildlife, and watersheds of our National Forest and surrounding communities for present and future generations.”

Our focus is the High Knob Massif, a 4,223-foot mountain mass that spans the three westernmost counties in far southwestern Virginia. High Knob is in the Clinch Ranger District of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests in the heart of the Clinch Valley Bioreserve. The Bioreserve is a 2,200 square mile area designated by The Nature Conservancy as one of the Last Great Places in the World. TCC is committed to creating a welcoming, inclusive, and equitable community. Undergirding this commitment is the conviction that all human beings are interconnected, not just with one another, but with all of nature.