SUNDAY Q&A WITH...

Cale Jaffe, a senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center

Cale Jaffe, 40, is a senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center. He grew up in Northern Virginia and went to Yale University. He met his wife, Katie, while working in Washington after college. They went to the University of Virginia for graduate school and have been in Charlottesville ever since. She’s an internal medicine physician at U.Va. They have three children.

What is the Southern Environmental Law Center? How big is it?

SELC is a nonprofit conservation group that uses the power of the law to protect what is unique about the South. In courts, with legislatures and before agencies, we work to enforce the laws and advance policies that determine the quality of the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the special places we all cherish. We have roughly 50 attorneys working in nine offices throughout the region, including an office in Richmond. I work in the headquarters.

What did you do before you came to the SELC?

Right before SELC, I was with McGuire-Woods LLP. I still have many friends there. By working on both sides on some tough environmental issues, I’ve learned never to see the opponent as an enemy. One of my favorite quotations is from J.M. Barrie: “Never ascribe to an opponent motives meaner than your own.”

How long have you been at SELC? What do you do?

I’ve been at SELC for almost nine years. Some of my favorite work has been before the State Corporation Commission, where we’ve promoted new investments in energy efficiency and solar power.

You have been active in the debate over a proposal to mine uranium in Pittsylvania County. What is your position?

Along with a broad array of groups — everyone from the Hampton Roads Planning District Commission to the Virginia Farm Bureau — we believe that Virginia should maintain its longstanding ban on uranium mining.

Can uranium be mined safely in Virginia?

It’s not a question of “safe” versus “unsafe”; it’s a question of understanding the risks. The National Academy of Sciences’ report on uranium mining in Virginia — that’s the gold standard here — validated many of our core concerns. For example, they found that uranium waste “disposal sites represent significant potential sources of contamination for thousands of years, and the long-term risks remain poorly defined.”

In fairness, what does the other side say? Why do they think mining is a good thing?

The industry has pointed to a Coal and Energy Commission study, which estimated that in a best-case scenario, uranium mining could mean a $6 billion benefit for Virginia. But that same study found that in a worst-case scenario, mining could trigger an $11 billion loss. There is a business stigma — not to mention real risks — from being situated next to the East Coast’s only uranium waste disposal site.

How big an issue is uranium mining?

At stake is an alternative vision for economic development: a beautiful river, tourism, agriculture and high-tech companies drawn by the Institute for Advanced Learning and Research in Danville.

The 2013 General Assembly is expected to consider lifting a 30-year state ban on uranium mining. Do you think this next session will decide the issue once and for all?

I do think this year is shaping up as the go/no-go decision-point.

The proposed mine would be 145 miles southwest of Richmond. Why should people who don’t live in that area care about uranium mining?

Radioactive waste disposal in a hurricane-prone environment poses a significant threat to the agricultural, tourism and education-based economies in southern Virginia. But it also poses a downstream threat for Norfolk and Virginia Beach water supplies, which is why those communities have been so involved in defending the ban.

What do you do for fun?

Family bike rides or ski trips are my favorite, but anything I get to do with my kids is a blast. Even something as simple as teaching my 4-year-old to feed the dog. Nothing in the world comes close to the fun of parenthood.

— Rex Springston