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## Can USFS hold its ground?

Those opposed to the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline in this region heartily applauded when the U.S. Forest Service recently rejected the route chosen by builder Dominion that would affect protected habitats and species on federal land.

We think it's too soon to celebrate.

Dominion has vowed to USFS officials it will find a route that meets the forest's standards. It could choose one alternative that goes through Mill Gap in Highland County. It could go a little further south and examine a potential route through Bath County. Or, it could skirt much of this region entirely.

We think it's more likely Dominion will continue to argue the benefits it claims for the project should override concerns about impacts to protected habitats and ecosystems, notably the Cow Knob salamander's home on Shenandoah Mountain — the only place in the world it lives.

The forest service, to its great credit, has not succumbed to political pressure from Washington to simply make an exception for the ACP to ignore its own regulations and forest management objectives. Six Federal Energy Regulatory Commission staff and contractors participated during the teleconference when the U.S. Forest Service insisted the proposed ACP avoid Shenandoah Mountain altogether and said Dominion's latest route variation is unacceptable.

We're glad FERC was listening.

But that doesn't mean Dominion won't fight for this route, and avoid the very expensive prospect of moving the line somewhere else.

Dominion is one of the most powerful companies in Virginia, and it has plenty of money available to politick its way through this challenge. We hope high-level forestry officials will hold their ground, but when it comes to buying its way through regulation, Dominion has proven time and again that its deep pockets and monopoly lock-down can secure outcomes to its benefit.

By rejecting the primary route, the USFS has taken a stand on behalf of all U.S. citizens — citizens whose tax dollars support the programs and environmental protections the national forests provide, to each of us.

Let's remember: the USFS is a "cooperating agency" in this process. Its job is not to take a political position on the viability of the ACP. Its role is to identify issues that should be addressed in the Environmental Impact

Statement, coordinated by FERC, and provide analysis on concerns that would affect the national forest lands. Then, USFS will use the EIS to decide whether to authorize construction of the ACP on those federal properties.

At this point, forestry officials say they cannot authorize the currently preferred ACP route through some of its most sensitive ecosystems.

The Cow Knob salamander in George Washington National Forest, along with the Northern flying squirrel, Cheat Mountain salamander and red spruce restoration area on the Monongahela forest, are irreplaceable. No form of mitigation would offset their loss once those habits are fragmented. The forest service has repeatedly made this clear to Dominion, in no uncertain terms, and told the company it must find a different route.

One of the reasons USFS is likely standing so strongly is that the agreement made between the USFS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect the Cow Knob salamander was the first of its kind. It was created such that if the USFS could protect the salamander, the Fish and Wildlife Service could avoid listing the tiny amphibian as an endangered species. This kind of agreement was unprecedented, and the hope is that more such agreements could be struck nationwide for other endangered species. If our federal agencies are going to great lengths to find more effective ways of reliably protecting species and habitats, it would be unreasonable to allow any developer, even one as powerful as Dominion, to undermine that process. If they allow exceptions for certain projects, why bother trying?



*Click on photo for high-res version*

**Horizontal directional drilling is a method of boring underground that Dominion proposes to use in several places along the Atlantic Coast Pipeline route, including under Shenandoah Mountain, in order to avoid damage to the protected Cow Knob salamander populations and habitat on national forest lands. However, this kind of drilling also requires a lot of earth disturbance in pull-back and staging areas, as seen here.**

**This staging area was for drilling under I-79 in West Virginia for the 36-inch diameter Stonewall Pipeline, which took place last fall. The drilling distance was far shorter than proposed for the ACP, only about 1,000 feet. The drilling distances for the 42-inch ACP would be more than a mile.**

*Photo courtesy the Pipeline Air Force, Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition*

But we think Dominion will attempt to make its case for boring beneath the surface, though the USFS has not accepted that option, either. Drilling under these areas, including the Blue Ridge Parkway and Appalachian Trail, brings a new set of concerns, not the least of which is the enormous amount of land disturbance required at both ends of a drilled bore.

The USFS will review the technology involved, but has made it clear to Dominion it will require the company to drill successfully and have an alternative strategy for crossing the Appalachian Trail and Blue Ridge Parkway before it allows any other ACP construction on national forest lands.

That is a masterful move, and one that speaks to the USFS commitment to protecting these sensitive areas and species. If Dominion is allowed to proceed with substantial pipeline construction prior to drilling on federal lands, it would be much more difficult to change the route later if drilling fails. Getting the company to prove its engineering works first makes good sense.

Again, all of this speaks to how Dominion's project has unfolded in an utterly haphazard and hurried way. Its record of communication with

the USFS is already poor. Last year, the USFS spent nine months just getting the company to follow its rules for soil surveys. Nine months of ridiculous wrangling when Dominion failed to do them correctly, with the right personnel.

Is it any wonder forestry officials are skeptical about whether Dominion can do something much more complicated and technically challenging, like horizontal drilling? Why would anyone believe Dominion could pull it off without damage to water, soils, or sensitive habitats?

As we have said for two years, we do not think it's possible to install a pipeline through this area without irreparable harm — to private landowners and their springs; to protected or endangered species and habitats; to waterways that will be inundated with soil runoff.

Just this week, in urging area landowners to get trained in monitoring water for a baseline, karst expert Rick Lambert said Dominion's plans call for monitoring wells and springs within 100 feet of the pipeline corridor are wholly inadequate.

The method used for tracing where water goes underground is a dye test. "The shortest dye trace I know of in Highland County is 200 feet, the longest is 6.5 miles," Lambert said in a story in this week's issue of The Recorder. "The average dye trace in Highland County is 1.6 miles long. If the pipeline is built, then landowners in Highland County near the right of way need to collect baseline data now, prior to construction, in order to identify impacts during and after construction."

If impacts to water can be measured in miles, not feet, then landowners should certainly be worried. Even those living more than a mile from the pipeline route could have their water affected by construction. Those who own land within seven miles of the route are urged to learn how to monitor their water so that if their water is tainted by pipeline construction, they will be able to prove it later.

The training will be held 9:30-4:30 Saturday, Feb. 13 in the Highland County Public Library.

Any property owner who has received a request for pipeline surveying, even on an alternative route, should certainly get there. But note that even those several miles from any listed route are urged to attend as well.

Meanwhile, we all wait anxiously to see how Dominion's plans change in response to the USFS. Until then, we cannot sit idle in thinking this project might not affect Highland County at all.