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Monitoring of ACP-crossed streams to begin

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — “They cannot avoid discharging into sinkholes.”

That statement, made by karst expert Rick Lambert of Monterey, provided the framework for the latest effort to hold the line on impacts from the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline in Highland, a county riddled with karst features.

About 20 people turned out Sunday to start a volunteer program for collecting water data and monitoring impacts of the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline on Highland’s drinking water, with help from a national conservation association.

Rick Webb of Mustoe said he was gratified by what, for Highland, was such a large gathering.

Webb, a retired water quality scientist and chair of the Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition, introduced Jake Lemon of Bellefont, Pa., eastern shale gas monitoring coordinator for Trout Unlimited. The West Virginia Rivers Coalition is another partner in the monitoring program.



Jake Lemon of Trout Unlimited, left, spoke with Josh Umar after the meeting Sunday. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

Lemon explained the main idea was to select a set of streams and collect data on a routine basis. The 150,000-member nonprofit Trout Unlimited monitoring program started in 2010 with numerous pipelines crossing high-quality trout streams, he said. Lemon explained the main idea was to select a set of streams and collect data on a routine basis. The 150,000-member nonprofit Trout Unlimited monitoring program started in 2010 with numerous pipelines crossing high-quality trout streams, he said.



Mustoe property owner Roy Meunier inspected a map at the Trout Unlimited presentation. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

“This part of Virginia is one of our high-priority areas for conservation,” Lemon said. “Why care about trout if you don’t fish? Because trout are good indicators of water quality.”

Trout Unlimited has an extensive network of volunteers in Pennsylvania, Monongahela and George Washington National Forests, Lemon said. The group’s main concern is erosion and sediment control. He said stream crossings are the primary points of potential impacts from pipelines.

Mobilization of sediment, reduction in streambed stability, and destruction of instream habitat are signs of water quality issues, Lemon said.

A volunteer’s report in Pennsylvania resulted in a pipeline stop order by the state environmental agency, he noted.

Besides land disturbance, horizontal directional drilling for a pipeline can result in “Bentonite blowout.” The term describes what happens when the bentonite clay used to lubricate a drill bit becomes pressurized and ruptures a streambed from below, Lemon said.

Other causes of trout habitat destruction are failure, improper installation and lack of maintenance of erosion controls, and the rugged, wet terrain of central Appalachia is not suited to best management practices for pipeline construction, he explained.

After a pipeline is built, the challenge is to make sure hillsides are stabilized. It was pointed out that pipeline companies apply herbicides to maintain rights of way, and those chemicals drain into streams.

Lemon said volunteers attend a one-day training class to certify them as monitors. A session in early 2016 is being considered for the training, and to begin documenting existing stream water characteristics. The three phases of monitoring include baseline, during construction and post-construction.

Monitors measure water's clarity, temperature, Ph, flow, and conductance, a measure of dissolved solids in water. Monitors count pebbles to assess the streambed's condition, Lemon explained.

"An important part of what we do is visual reconnaissance to have a photographic record of changes in an area," Lemon said. Trout Unlimited has a large online data set that it shares with agencies, academic institutions and researchers.

"There's lots of high-quality waters in Highland with the Atlantic Coast Pipeline coming through," he said. The organizations may look into engaging volunteers along the pipeline's southern routes. The proposed Mountain Valley Pipeline is also being monitored, he said. It was asked whether the data collection was needed if the proposed pipeline does not pass through Highland. "Once we lay a foundation, we'll want to keep it going," Lemon replied.

Lemon, who holds a degree in environmental science water resources from Indiana State University, has been a water monitor for eight years and has been a staff member of Trout Unlimited for two years. "My main goal is to be able to support folks to collect high quality data and identify potential pollution events and stem further damage," Lemon said.

DPMC is a coalition of 13 different conservation groups concerned about regulatory oversight of pipeline projects, Webb explained.

"We've found that the regulatory system is dysfunctional," he said. "(The Department of Environmental Quality) has gone missing in terms of pipeline projects. They (DEQ) let them review their own plans with no oversight; DEQ said it hasn't allocated resources," Webb said.

Six counties have petitioned the governor, and he has not responded. "Hopefully, Highland County will follow suit," Webb said.

DPMC hopes to get erosion and sediment control plans "and review them ourselves," he said. The coalition is documenting environmental features along the route with the help of several airplane pilots. The group plans to do aerial surveillance and videos to submit to agencies when there are complaints, Webb explained.

"We've seen very outlaw behavior," he said of pipeline companies that evoke high environmental standards on their websites but fail to comply with environmental laws during construction. He pointed to Dominion's violations and fines in West Virginia last year. "The same people will be building this (proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline) project."

The Cowpasture River Preservation Association has been monitoring that waterway for a long time, Webb said. "Of the six major watersheds in Highland, the proposed pipeline's 25-mile corridor would cross five of them and include 35 miles of separate access roads."

Webb spoke about the Giles County pipeline project that polluted a public water supply with diesel fuel. He recommended that hydrological studies be done to safeguard karst features, including the recharge areas that feed drinking water supplies.

The fact that most of Highland's streams are not being monitored is the reason that "we need to do it," Webb said. He said the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission is a revolving door, where people work and then go to work for the pipeline industry.

It was asked if there were an effort to dissuade Dominion from avoiding best management practices. Webb said he did not think Dominion could be persuaded by embarrassment. "Fines are the cost of doing business," Webb said.

While no one can put a monetary value on a stream that has supplied families for generations, the board of Dominion apparently thinks there's a price for everything, Webb said. He said he felt the project is less likely to happen as proposed now that the forest service has stepped in to defy the plans because it contradicts the forest management plans and because of shoddy data collection practices.

Webb pointed out the longest open trench approved by DEQ was 15 miles long. "It's really kind of distressing," he said.

Webb described potential data collection sites. There would be nine stream crossings include Collins Run, Laurel Fork, Back Creek, Jackson River, Crab Run (twice), Bullpasture River, Cowpasture River, Shaws Fork and Wilson Hollow.

Wilson Hollow could be dramatically impacted if it serves as the staging area for boring a pipeline tunnel through Shenandoah Mountain because the area would need to equal the roughly mile-long bore, Webb said.

Webb identified six different sets of stream water collection points and 15 priority sites.

Persons interested in volunteering may contact Rick Webb, Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition and Highlanders for Responsible Development, at rwebb.dpmc@gmail.com or (540) 290-0913; Jacob Lemon, Trout Unlimited, jlemon@tu.org or (814) 779-3965; or Angie Rosser, West Virginia Rivers Coalition, arosser@wvivers.org or (304) 437-1274.