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Pipeline must avoid salamanders, USFS says

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — The U.S. Forest Service sent Dominion a hard choice last week.

The USFS won't agree with Dominion's plan to avoid Cow Knob salamander habitat by burrowing under a mountain until after the pipeline company attempts to drill.

The USFS issued the catch-22 style ultimatum last Friday, in the wake of a recent Federal Energy Regulatory Commission directive for Dominion to re-route the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline away from Shenandoah Mountain and Cow Knob salamander habitat.

Dominion can begin the entire pipeline construction project by boring through Shenandoah Mountain, but if the drilling project proves unsuccessful, then the company must re-route the pipeline away from Cow Knob salamander habitat, the forest service said.

In a strongly worded response forest supervisor Clyde Thompson sent to FERC, the USFS said the pipeline company's proposal, filed Oct. 30, includes two bores through the mountain that would be connected by pipe, installed by the open trench method, for a distance of about one-half mile.

Cow Knob salamander "populations and habitat would also be affected in the pullback areas, at drill pad locations, test drilling sites, access areas, and any other area that would affect CKS and their habitats. ACP's proposal states that 0.7 mile of CKS habitat at or above 2,500 feet would be affected.

"This proposal does not fully avoid CKS populations or habitat and remains inconsistent with the CKS Conservation Agreement," the USFS said.

Last June, the USFS and the pipeline company discussed the feasibility of horizontal directional drill as a measure to avoid Cow Knob salamander habitat. Discussions included the engineering

challenges associated with HDD that often contribute to failure, such as the length of the drilling, elevation of entrance and exit points, drilling mud, frac outs, and required pull back areas, the response said.

“A significant portion of the discussion focused on the length of the HDD required to avoid CKS habitat and if that length of HDD would be feasible given the engineering challenges. No feasibility study or report was provided with the proposal. In its Oct. 30 submittal, ACP requested concurrence from the forest service and CKS Conservation Team upon completion of the HDD plan, before the work is completed,” USFS said.

“Concurrence cannot be provided on the basis of the current proposal because the proposal does not fully avoid CKS populations and habitat. If the proposal were modified to fully avoid CKS populations and habitat, concurrence could not be provided until the HDDs have been successfully completed. If the HDDs prove to be infeasible or unsuccessful by any means during testing or implementation, the CKS route variation would no longer be viable.

“Subsequently, ACP would have to select a route that fully avoids CKS habitat, as stated in the forest service’s Sept. 17 filing,” USFS continued. “Therefore, the forest service would need to assure that CKS habitat would be protected through measures such as conditioning the special use permit and also requesting that FERC condition the order issuing the certificate to require the HDDs in CKS habitat to be completed prior to any other project construction, so that ACP could subsequently select another route in the event the proposed HDDs prove infeasible or unsuccessful.”

[U.S. Forest Service Letter to FERC](#), 12/11/15