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USFS: Pipeline imperils habitat

ACP formally files for certificate

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER



**The Cow Knob salamander is believed to be an endangered species.
(Photo courtesy Steve Johnson)**

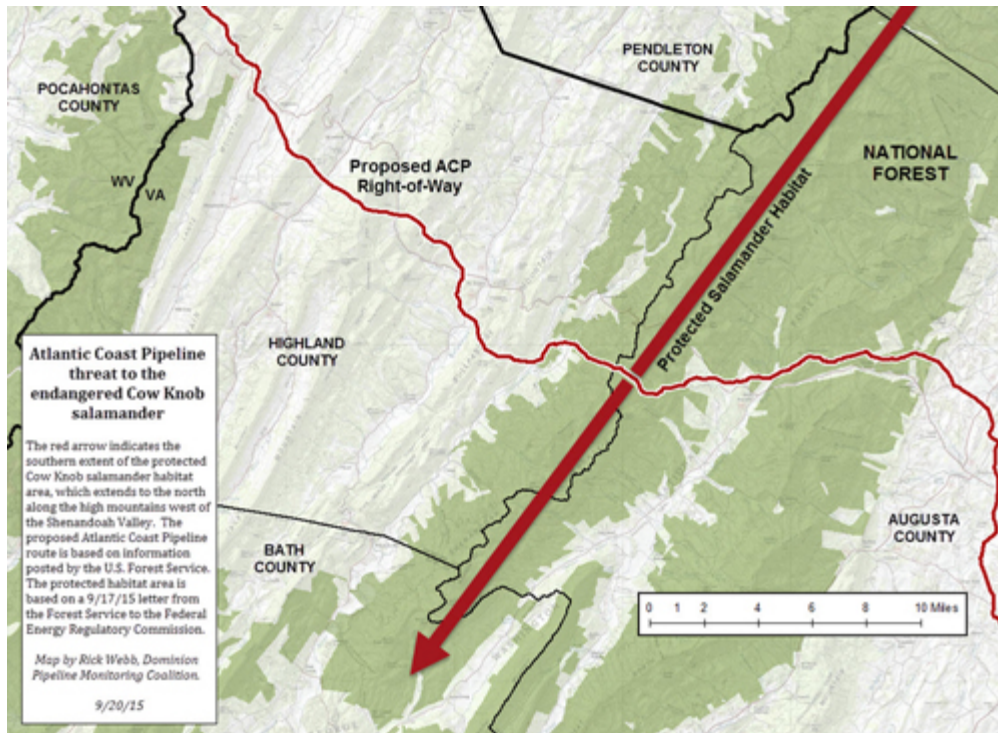
MONTEREY — They've been clambering around in the forest for millions of years.

Little amphibian critters were squirming about on a woodland mountaintop while a giant power company made national news late last week by formally filing for permission build a natural gas pipeline.

But media outlets missed out on the fact that the filing fell squarely on the heels of a new U.S. Forest Service warning that may affect the outcome of the proposed pipeline's environmental licensing process.

According to the U.S. Forest Service, construction of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline could wipe out species of tiny mountain-dwelling amphibians thought to be endangered. The news adds to a long list of other concerns over the proposal's feasibility.

The ACP project effects on Cow Knob and Cheat Mountain salamanders “must be avoided and cannot be mitigated,” wrote Thomas Speaks Jr., forest supervisor, in a letter last Thursday to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. “It is essential to evaluate alternatives to avoid adverse effects on these two species.”



Map shows the range of the Cow Knob salamander and the proposed pipeline route. (Courtesy Rick Webb, Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition)

The Cow Knob salamander’s habitat is almost entirely limited to the George Washington National Forest.

Last Friday, Atlantic Coast Pipeline LLC, a limited liability corporation that is majority-owned by Dominion, formally filed with FERC to build the pipeline. Dominion issued a news release describing the project as essential, reiterating claims of huge economic benefits and strong political support. The release quoted Diane Leopold, president of the Dominion affiliate that would build and operate the proposed 560-mile, \$5 billion pipeline from West Virginia, across Highland County, to North Carolina and Hampton Roads. “We are committed to excellence in every aspect of this important project,” Leopold said.

Friday’s filing opens a new chapter in the ACP story that began in May 2014 with announcement of the proposal. The procedural filing Friday reaffirms project backers’ intent to move forward and triggers FERC to write an environmental impact statement that, by law, must take into consideration and address concerns over salamanders, drinking water, erosion and other issues.

Lew Freeman, president of Highlanders for Responsible Development, said the proposed route in Friday’s filing seems to follow the same route as originally planned. It shows that Dominion continues to ignore worries about drinking water and other concerns expressed by county

supervisors and town council, he said. Both governing bodies suggested route changes to avoid aquifers feeding McDowell and Monterey municipal water systems.



Ramsey’s Draft Wilderness in the Shenandoah Mountain area along the border between Highland and Augusta counties is habitat for the Cow Knob salamander. The proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline would cross about one-half mile south of Signal Knob in the foreground. (Photo courtesy Rick Webb, Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition)

Freeman noted the HRD annual public meeting at 2 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 27 at The Highland Center Pavilion will feature a presentation and discussion on the project, its local implications, what will happen next, and how concerned citizens can have their voices heard. Those who are planning to attend should RSVP to lewfreeman@gmail.com and bring a dessert for a social following the meeting.

The forest service says the proposed pipeline route is a poor choice because construction there would violate an existing 1994 conservation agreement between the USFS and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and construction activity would kill salamanders. The agency submitted new information stating that “Virginia and West Virginia Draft State Wildlife Action Plans both clearly state that the Cow Knob salamander is a species that needs protection, for the salamanders themselves and the habitat upon which they depend.”

That habitat includes the Shenandoah Mountain ridge along the eastern Highland County line. Avoiding the habitat would mean Dominion would need to horizontally drill about 4,000 feet through Shenandoah Mountain or redraw the route to the north or south, USFS said. The salamander is a proposed tier-one endangered species that “faces extremely high risk of extinction ... Populations of these species are at critically low levels, face immediate threats, or occur within an extremely limited range. Intense and immediate management action is needed.

USFS explained that staff with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries have indicated this species “will always face a significant threat of extinction due to its limited range,” but no

additional conservation actions or research have been identified to help conserve the species. "Most of the habitat is protected via conservation agreements between the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service," the agency said. "As such, it is recommended that this species be prioritized as Tier 1c.

"Fragmentation and loss of forest cover is a primary concern for the Appalachian endemic salamanders," USFS wrote. "The largest and most extensive populations tend to occur in areas with extensive forest cover. Maintaining an extensive forest canopy is important to maintaining suitable forest microclimates."

USFS explained that roads and utility corridors fragment forest salamander populations, and changes in the forest floor, especially woody debris and leaf litter, can substantially reduce salamander populations. "Poor culvert placement and road drainage fragments salamander populations in headwater streams. Loss or reductions of woody debris and leaf litter can also reduce populations of salamanders in headwater streams. Some endemic forest salamanders also are displaced by more widespread salamanders following changes in forest structure and increased fragmentation. Amphibians can best respond to external stressors when their habitat is intact and functioning. Maintaining ecosystem integrity ensures amphibian life zones are also present and functioning. Conservation actions must focus on preserving core areas of intact habitat, restoring areas of impaired habitat, and re-establishing populations in appropriate locations," the agency explained.

The proposed pipeline route goes through known Cow Knob salamander habitat and the USFS said field surveys for the pipeline have found Cow Knob salamander along the proposed right of way. Cow Knob salamanders were found from the highest point down to 2,500 feet, although they have been seen as low as 2,000 feet in more protected habitat, the agency said. "The pipeline route ACP has chosen is poor because it traverses a long ridge at higher elevations with good Cow Knob salamander habitat.

"It was pointed out that the agreement does not allow take of Cow Knob salamander," the agency continued. "Pipeline construction in the present location would kill numerous Cow Knob salamanders. Impacts to Cow Knob salamander habitat were discussed. It was estimated that the loss of habitat from direct clearing and the indirect effect of exposing the forest edge to sunlight, wind, etc., would result in a swath approximately 750 feet wide through Cow Knob salamander habitat. This swath would also be a corridor for edge predators, such as raccoons, to access the heart of the Cow Knob salamander habitat resulting in increased predation. Illegal ATV access along the right of way is a real possibility that would likely result in degradation of habitat resulting from loss of vegetation, sedimentation, and soil compaction. The pipeline corridor will eliminate gene flow between the north and south part of the populations. This will isolate the southern extent of the population making it susceptible to stochastic events. Climate change is a threat, and that could realistically wipe out this southern population, because much of it is at lower elevation and on driest sites."

In addition, USFS pointed out, the population north of pipeline is isolated due to the habitat fragmentation by U.S. 250. The agreement states no new rights of way will be permitted in Cow Knob salamander habitat and the forest plan states that Cow Knob salamander habitat is unsuitable for new utility corridors and utility rights of way.

The USFWS has been petitioned to add the Cow Knob salamander to the list of endangered species and that request is set for review in 2016.

“Team consensus was that there needs to be a pipeline alternative that avoids Cow Knob salamander habitat completely,” USFS concluded.