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Coalition brings scrutiny for proposed pipeline



The creation of a coalition to supply public scrutiny and surveillance on the proposed Dominion pipeline project was announced Tuesday. The volunteer corps will include the newly formed “Pipeline Air Force” consisting of pilots and their planes to provide aerial surveillance as the group prepares to assure compliance with the regulatory procedures and permits Dominion will have to follow if the gas pipeline is approved. This photo includes two of the air force pilots and their planes as well as a number of observers and ground volunteers. (Photo courtesy DPMC)

MONTEREY — The newly formed Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition is among many regional organizations taking a stand in opposition to Dominion’s proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline that would cross the central Appalachian Mountain region, including some of the best remaining wild landscape in the eastern United States.



Jeff Shingleton, left, and Michael Godfrey stand ready to take to the air and help the new volunteer monitoring coalition. (Photo courtesy DPMC)

The coalition will use a corps of volunteers to monitor the project not only from the ground, but also from the air, with its “Pipeline Air Force.”

If the project goes forward despite citizen opposition, it will cut through 40-50 miles of national forest and cross a long list of the region's highest quality streams and rivers.

As proposed, the 42-inch natural gas pipeline would require clearing and bulldozing a 125-foot construction corridor straight up and down 20 or more forest-covered mountains in the 3,000 to 4,400-foot elevation range.

There is no precedent in the United States for pipeline construction on this scale in this type of steep mountain terrain.

The coalition is primarily concerned about the project's impact on water resources in the 100-mile mountain-and-valley section of the proposed pipeline route that extends from Cheat Mountain in Randolph County, W.Va., to the Blue Ridge Mountains in Nelson County. Because the proposed project is generally routed along the divide between major river basins, it will impact the upper reaches of multiple mountain headwater streams, many of which provide habitat for the region's native brook trout and drinking water for downstream communities.



The Pipeline Air Force has started photographing pipeline projects such as this one in national forest, a 12- inch pipeline across Peters Mountain in Giles County. (Photo courtesy DPMC)

Many conservationists are convinced the project cannot be completed without significant long-term harm to the region's water resources and ecological integrity. "It seems unlikely that Dominion officials have been properly informed about the problems associated with this proposed project. I don't believe it can survive a legitimate environmental review or be constructed in compliance with state and federal environmental requirements," said Rick Webb, coordinator for the coalition.

The coalition intends to provide a new level of public oversight with respect to the proposed pipeline. This will be achieved through careful review of permit applications and site plans, and should the project go to construction, through ground and aerial surveillance for strict compliance with water-related regulations.

“In too many cases, government agencies take a relaxed approach to regulatory enforcement they call ‘compliance assistance,’ as opposed to actual enforcement,” said Webb. Additionally, the sheer scope of this project means the staff and resources of the regulatory agencies will be stretched beyond their limits. Without detailed oversight, irreversible environmental damage could easily occur. “We can’t let a project on this scale, in this environment, go forward on that basis,” he added.

A key element in the coalition’s surveillance program is the volunteer citizen Pipeline Air Force, which will observe and document construction from the air. At present, the Pipeline Air Force includes three planes, and the coalition is seeking the participation of additional pilots with planes.

In addition to aerial surveillance, the coalition plans to promote and support the involvement of regional citizen water quality monitoring groups to obtain baseline and post-construction water quality data in relation to the proposed pipeline corridor and its associated infrastructure, such as transport roads and staging areas.

The effort currently involves numerous trained citizens and scientists who are engaged in research related to the regulatory review process, as well as in analysis of ecological conditions in the proposed pipeline corridor.

The list of regional conservation organizations participating in the coalition includes: West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club, Allegheny Highlands Alliance, Virginia Wilderness Committee, Friends of Shenandoah Mountain, Highlanders for Responsible Development, Shenandoah Valley Network, Friends of Middle River, Augusta County Alliance, Greenbrier River Watershed Association, and Friends of Nelson County.

The coalition is a member of the Allegheny Blue Ridge Alliance, a group of more than 25 organizations from Virginia and West Virginia organized to work on the pipeline issue.

Any group or individual is welcome to assist in the coalition’s efforts. For information, contact Webb at rwebb@virginia.edu.