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## Highland scientist leading pipeline opposition

By Geoff Hamill



Residents of a multi-county area formed the Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition (DPMC) this fall to ensure legal and regulatory compliance by Dominion Resources and its contractors involved in the construction of a proposed gas pipeline through the area. If Dominion's pipeline proposal goes to construction, DPMC will utilize a small fleet of four aircraft, as well as ground monitoring, to assure compliance with regulatory procedures and permits. In the photo, two DPMC pilots and their planes with a number of observers and ground volunteers. Photo courtesy of the DPMC.

A retired scientist from Highland County, Virginia, is leading a local effort to prevent construction of a large-diameter natural gas pipeline through national forests in West Virginia and Virginia.

Rick Webb, of Mustoe, is a retired senior scientist with the University of Virginia. During a 30-year career in the university's environmental science department, Webb spent a lot of time studying the forests and streams in the mountains of West Virginia and Virginia.

"I managed a program that involved monitoring the water chemistry of streams in the mountains in Virginia and West Virginia and the Central Appalachian region," he said. "We collected samples from lots of streams and we did chemical analysis on them in our laboratory. We did a synoptic study involving close to 500 streams in 35 different counties in Virginia, and we did a lot of surveys in West Virginia."

Dominion Resources and three energy corporation partners have proposed construction of a 550-mile, 42-inch pipeline from West Virginia to North Carolina, with a 20-inch spur line to Hampton Roads, Virginia. The companies' current proposal calls for construction through approximately 30 miles of national forest in West Virginia and Virginia. The project requires approval by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC).

Several organizations have mobilized to oppose Dominion's plan, among them the Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition (DPMC), of which Webb is a founding member and coordinator. DPMC is a coalition of various groups, including the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, the Greenbrier River Watershed Association, the Sierra Club of Virginia, Wild Virginia, Highlanders for Responsible Development and several other groups.

Webb discussed why he opposes Dominion's pipeline proposal.

"I don't believe that this project can be built without long-term degradation to this area of the world, which happens to be the best remaining wild landscape in the Eastern United States, hands-down," he said. "It's got the greatest biodiversity of anywhere in the Northeast. It's the largest extent of continuous unfragmented forest and this pipeline would cut right through it. The pipeline would be the dominant feature of the landscape and it would fragment this forest. It would cause temporary and long-term damage to the streams."

The health of Appalachian Mountain waterways is closely tied to the surrounding forests, according to Webb.

"You can't separate the forests from the streams," he said. "These are forest streams. The fish that live in these streams, like the brook trout, are forest fish. What happens to the forest and what happens to the soil in the forest affects what happens in the streams. It's all tied together. I don't believe there is any mitigation that can make this project acceptable; no implementation of best management practices that will work; no adjustment in the route that will make it okay. It simply cannot be done."

Webb said Dominion didn't expect so much resistance from mountain communities.

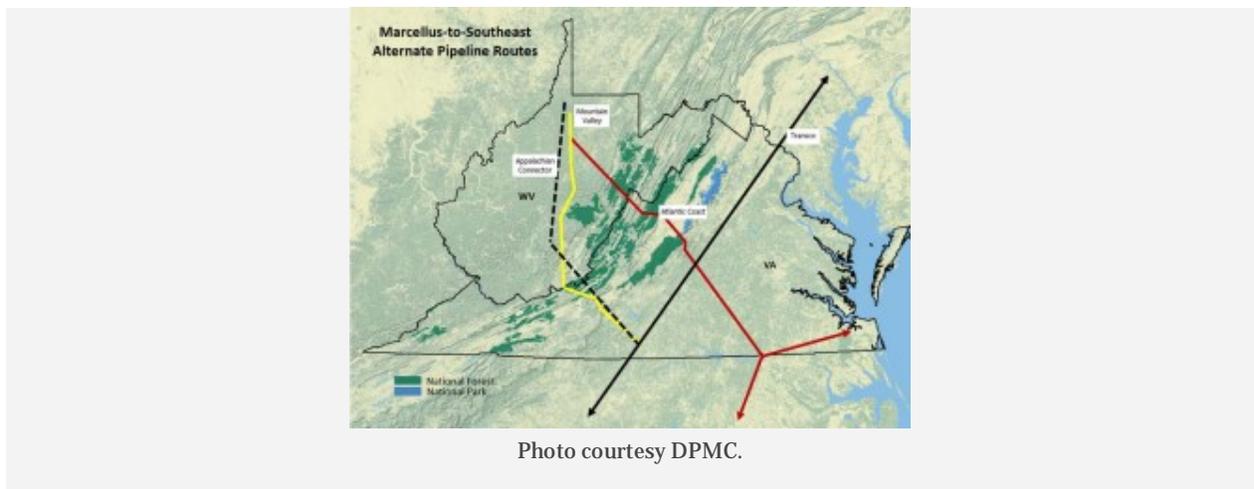
"I don't think Dominion understands the determination and the depth of the opposition to this project," he said. "I think they have been taken by surprise, particularly in the mountains. In Nelson County, Augusta County, Highland County, Pocahontas County and Randolph County, people are opposed to this project. People care about this landscape and we will do what we can to stop this project."

Webb said Dominion's promise to protect waterways is illusory.

"They're talking about building pipelines straight up and straight down steep mountainsides – 20 or more steep mountainsides – with high quality streams at the bottom of every one of those mountains," he said. "The landscape is simply too steep and too rugged to do it without damage."

They cannot control the runoff. They can't have runoff control structures in place while they have that equipment on the hillsides. They use multiple bulldozers, four or five bulldozers, chained together, to hold the big trackhoes in place on the mountainside. They can't have runoff control in place while they have that equipment there – it's not conceivable. They cannot control runoff in that situation."

"We're talking about impacting a landscape that's been set aside for future generations, for our children and their children and their children. We cannot, for the short-term profit of a private corporation, allow that to happen. This will be the last stronghold of the native brook trout. It's going to be impacted by climate change, but this is the place it will last the longest. And they want to cross these streams one after the other and damage them. It just can't be allowed to happen."



Two other major natural gas pipelines have been proposed to accomplish the same purpose as Dominion's. EQT Corporation proposed the Mountain Valley Pipeline, which would run from West Virginia to North Carolina. William's Appalachian Connector pipeline would connect gas supply areas in northern West Virginia to the company's existing Transco pipeline in Southern Virginia. All three pipelines would transport natural gas from production fields in West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio to the Atlantic Coast. But Dominion's pipeline would have the greatest impact on protected public lands, according to Webb.

"There's three [pipelines] on the books right now being proposed for this region, and it could be four before FERC at the same time." he said. "The Dominion pipeline is unique in terms of the conservation lands that would be impacted. We're talking mainly about national forests. Initially, it proposed to cross approximately 50 miles of national forest. They adjusted the route somewhat, now it may be down to 30 miles of national forest. The other pipelines cross just two or three miles of national forest, at the most. There are a lot of issues related to pipeline construction – a lot of them

apply to pipelines everywhere. The amount of national forest that's impacted is what makes the Dominion pipeline stand out."

DPMC plans to ensure that regulatory agencies are doing their jobs.

"We are opposed to this project," said Webb. "We don't believe it can be built in compliance with our public environmental policies and our environmental laws and regulations. Our purpose is to bring a new level of scrutiny to the regulatory review of this project, and, if the project goes forward, to its construction. We intend to become as well informed as possible about all of the laws and regulations and authorizations that this pipeline must have to proceed – and there's a long list."

DPMC wants corporate directors to understand their responsibility.

"The Dominion people who have spoken at these open houses seem very sincere," said Webb. "They say, 'we have a very strong environmental ethic, we're going to do things very carefully.' Maybe they do, but they're not the people doing the work. I don't know if they have any connection to what's happening on the ground or not. I'm sure the people in the board room won't have any direct connection to it. Part of our task is to connect the people in the board room to what's going on on the ground. Make them understand it and make them responsible for it. It's not going to be okay for Dominion to say, 'that's just a rogue sub-contractor.' We're going to make sure that they're not going to get away with it."

If the Dominion project is approved for construction, DPMC has a plan to monitor construction from the ground and air.

"Our surveillance will involve water quality downstream," said Webb. "We're working with other groups to make that happen. We also have what we call the pipeline air force. We have four planes and four pilots. They're helping us with case studies. We're getting aerial photography of other projects that have gone forward. If this project goes forward, despite all of our concerns and despite the environmental review process that should not allow it to go forward, we plan to be in the air watching this project very carefully with video cameras and still cameras. We will use the evidence to go to the agencies, we will go to the courts, we will do what we can to prevent serial damage, as they go forward. We fully expect to see egregious damage, based on what we've seen at other pipeline projects."

Prior to any state or federal environmental review of Dominion's proposal, the governors of both West Virginia and Virginia expressed their support for the pipeline project. Webb characterizes the governors' actions as an abrogation of duties.

“Our own governor [Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe] has pre-empted the process by declaring it’s a good project before anybody’s even looked at it,” said Webb. “He did not even consult with his own Secretary of Natural Resources or any of the agencies, that are there for him to work with to make sure that environmental policies and laws are implemented. He made a decision without consulting with these people and to me, that’s unethical.”

To download a slideshow presentation produced by Webb, “Pipeline Across the Alleghenies – Wild Landscape at Risk,” see [protecthighland.org](http://protecthighland.org) on the Internet.