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Landowner determined to protect Laurel Fork

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — A western Highland property owner has told Dominion Power to stay away, in response to the proposed natural gas pipeline.

McChesney “Ches” Goodall III wrote Emmett Toms of Dominion Power State and Local Affairs in Staunton last week, explaining his family owns 1,683 acres in northwestern Highland County adjoining the Monongahela National Forest.

“The entire tract was placed under a very strict easement with The Nature Conservancy in 2007 with the intention of protecting this property to the fullest extent possible,” Goodall wrote. “As a result, the easement includes a ‘no subdivision’ clause, a prohibition on any new dwellings, several large blocks of timber that are to be preserved as undisturbed old growth, and wide ‘no cut’ riparian buffers on Laurel Fork and all of its major tributaries.

“Due to a state rare, high elevation ecosystem in the headwaters of Laurel Fork, there are at least two critically imperiled (S1 ranking) plant communities and at least 13 critically imperiled (S1 ranking) species on the property. As a result, we eagerly put the property under easement with The Nature Conservancy in an effort to forever protect rare and threatened plant and animal life.

“Since we have gone to great lengths to protect this property for both our deceased father’s legacy and for future generations, we have absolutely no intention of letting even exploratory survey crews set foot on our land,” Goodall wrote.

As described in the easement, Rifle Ridge Farm contains “a combination of high elevation open ridgeline, diverse upland forests, healthy tributary streams, a dynamic alluvial floodplain, and both rare and common species and habitats. The property is part of an extensive, unbroken forested ecosystem; contains rare high elevation forest community types such as red spruce and northern hardwoods that provide habitat for snowshoe hare, northern flying squirrel, breeding neotropical song birds, and a diversity of animals and plants which are both rare and common in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The property contains approximately two miles of Laurel Fork, an exemplary, high elevation cold water stream that drains into the Shenandoah and Potomac River Basins and the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, providing habitat for native brook trout populations, and other characteristic aquatic species.”

Toms responded to Goodall Monday. “As you noted, Dominion is in the preliminary stages of considering a natural gas pipeline project from West Virginia, through Virginia and into North Carolina,” he wrote. “One of the first steps in this long process (one that will include a variety of opportunities for public input) is conducting on-the-ground surveys to help determine the best possible route, taking into consideration the potential environmental, cultural and other impacts. Surveyors are expected to begin their work this summer. “If Dominion decides to pursue this project and more information is ready to be shared, the company will sponsor public open house meetings in communities along a proposed route so everyone can see maps, learn about the project and talk with our project team members. The information that we gather at these meetings is helpful as we work to finalize the best route possible. We want to make sure that you are and stay informed.”

Editor’s note: The Recorder has learned from at least two other landowners, both in the Hightown area, who received letters about surveying their property. See next week’s Recorder for details.

