

THE RECORDER

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Awareness of proposed gas pipeline grows across region

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — Highlanders are just beginning to grapple with the potential effects of Dominion's proposed gas pipeline through the county. But elsewhere in Virginia, folks are taking a firm position and rallying in opposition.

There was an uptick last week in media coverage and opinions voiced in places where Dominion will soon survey for its proposed Southeast Reliability Project gas pipeline.

In West Virginia, the pipeline route could begin in Harrison and cross Lewis, Upshur, Randolph and Pocahontas counties. Dominion has so far met with elected officials in Lewis and Upshur.

Starting point in question

Clarksburg, W.Va., station WBOY reported the origin of the pipeline would be either southern Harrison or Northern Lewis counties.

"This is the type of detail that will be worked out as we find the best possible route with the least impact to the environment, cultural and historic resources," Dominion spokesman Jim Norvelle told The Recorder. Norvelle confirmed the origin could be in either county.

The news report quoted Bob Orndorff of Dominion, who met with Upshur commissioners Friday about the proposal. Orndorff is managing director-West Virginia state and local affairs. He is responsible for informing the West Virginia county officials along the pipeline study route where letters have been sent to landowners and surveying will start this summer.

Orndorff told media the way gas moves is changing. "We're starting to see that on our system. We're going to make multi-directional pipes that give us the ability to reverse the flow because of the prolific nature of the Utica and the Marcellus wells that have been drilled," he told a reporter.

Norvelle explained the project is being considered to move natural gas from West Virginia through Virginia to North Carolina. "What Bob was saying is that the natural gas industry is changing because of the abundance of natural gas in the Marcellus Shale field. Historically, natural gas pipelines were built to move gas from their production areas in Gulf Coast and Rocky Mountain states to the Eastern U.S. Now, because of the amount of natural gas in the Marcellus Shale field, producer and market demand have led to some of these pipelines being reversed, sending natural gas from the Ohio-West Virginia-Pennsylvania shale field to Gulf Coast and Rocky Mountain states," Norvelle said. "However, this project is being considered to move Marcellus Shale gas from

Ohio, West Virginia and Pennsylvania to North Carolina in response to growing market needs both for power generation and for local distribution to consumers.”

In addition to Highland County, Dominion’s study area in Virginia encompasses a path through Augusta, Nelson and other counties to the southeast, including Buckingham, Cumberland, Prince Edward, Nottoway, Dinwiddie, Brunswick and Greensville counties.

Crowd packs Nelson library

In Lovingson, more than 100 Nelson County residents turned out to vent their opposition to the pipeline plan during a meeting Sunday covered by WVIR and CBS/ABC Newsplex 19.

Recipients of certified mailings from Dominion, informing them of a forthcoming survey, learned that crews can enter and survey their property even if they don’t respond to the letters.

Nelson resident Ernie Reed, president and conservation director of Wild Virginia, attended the meeting. Tuesday, he asked the Nelson supervisors to hold a public meeting on the proposal. He said The Recorder first brought the proposal to his attention.

“Because the proposed pipeline would bisect the George Washington National Forest, on the southern part of the Shenandoah Mountain complex, which is an area of highest conservation value and concern for Wild Virginia, it for us became an immediate and top priority,” Reed said. “It appears that the pipeline could possibly impact areas south of Laurel Fork (The Nature Conservancy Laurel Fork Preserve or Galford Gap Potential Wilderness Area), Highland Wildlife Management Area, Crawford Knob Roadless Area, Elliott Knob Roadless Area, the special biological areas north of St. Mary’s Wilderness, and perhaps the north end of Jerkentight Roadless Area. Plus, plenty of areas in the Monongehela National Forest.

“Wild Virginia will oppose this in any way we can,” Reed told The Recorder. “We are familiar with the FERC filing, comment and review process. The proposed pipeline would have to go through the National Environmental Policy Act process to analyze its environmental impacts. Not only the impacts of its construction but also the cumulative impacts connected with other pipeline linkages: existing, proposed and those in the ‘reasonably foreseeable future.’ Wild Virginia will be involved in every step of these processes.”

Just last week, a decision in the U.S. Court of Appeals said federal law was violated when FERC did not review cumulative environmental impacts for upgrades to a pipeline running from Pennsylvania to New Jersey. Environmental groups had argued FERC should have considered impacts with environmental reviews on a Tennessee Gas pipeline for all its proposed upgrades along the line instead of separate sections. The court agreed FERC violated NEPA because it considered reviews in segmented portions of the line, thereby failing to consider cumulative effects.

“It appears that this pipeline (Dominion’s) will be primarily an export pipeline connected to deep water export facilities on the east coast,” Reed said. “I believe it is accurate to call this an export pipeline.” Dominion spokesmen have said the pipeline would not serve any export facility, however.

“The connection with the hydrofracking issue in the George Washington National Forest is obvious and a real concern,” Reed continued. “The Shenandoah Valley and Virginia strongly support a fracking ban, proposed by the forest service in a draft plan in 2011. Ten local governments adjacent to the forest, Virginia’s current

governor, two U.S. Senators and other officials joined more than 70,000 members of the public to back the ban. The District of Columbia Water and Sewer Authority, which serves over 3 million people, opposes fracking in the GWNF,” Reed said. “Supporters recognize that fracking threatens the unique and cherished resources on the George Washington National Forest – drinking water supplies, wildlife habitat, scenic values and outstanding opportunities to hunt, fish, hike, bike ride or simply enjoy a remote and wild landscape. A ban on fracking in the George Washington National Forest would ensure that the largest national forest in the East will remain a magnificent place enjoyed by more than one million visitors each year. Stopping the pipeline will, too,” he said.

Reed is personally affected by Dominion’s proposal, too. “I returned home a week after reading your article (in The Recorder) to find the (survey request) letter waiting for me,” Reed said. “Having already done lots of research, and hearing from some of my friends in Nelson County, I was hardly surprised that my 120-acre property was proposed to house a stretch of the pipeline.”

The Nelson County community meeting on the project was hastily organized at the Nelson County Memorial Library, Monday night, June 8, Reed explained, and at least 150 people packed the community room at the library.

Nelson County landowners Anne Buteau and Kathy Versluys, owner of the Acorn Inn, organized the meeting, Reed explained.

Those attending were invited to put stars on large map showing their property had received a survey letter, Reed said.

Buteau called the 800-number provided on the survey letter and asked for a list of people in Nelson who received it. Dominion would not share the list, citing it as proprietary information, Reed said.

“There is nowhere to say no, in response to the letter. The Virginia Code states that not replying within 14 days to the letter is consent,” Reed said.

“Those in attendance expressed solidarity with other counties and communities in the path of the pipeline,” he continued. “This is not a NIMBY issue. Stopping the pipeline, not moving it, is the focus of the group, which is now called Friends of Nelson County (against the pipeline). We are committed to working together with other communities to stop the pipeline.”

He said the Friends group will ask Nelson supervisors for a public meeting to hear citizens’ concerns so their comments would be part of the public record, and ask they adopt a resolution opposing the pipeline. “We will also be appealing to our state and federal representatives,” Reed said.

Delegate urges calm approach; others oppose strongly

The Nelson County Times reported on a local chamber of commerce meeting with Del. Dickie Bell and Sen. Creigh Deeds, both of whom represent Highland. The pipeline was among several issues Bell addressed, while Deeds focused on other matters.

Bell cautioned against jumping to conclusions because the proposal and its environmental effects are uncertain, according to the Times report, which quoted him as saying, “From a consumer standpoint and from an economic standpoint, I usually feel like the greater supply is good.”

While Highlanders for Responsible Development has stated its current position is to ask serious questions and await answers, a number of individuals and environmental group members outside Highland have spoken up with their own strong opinions and thoughts about the proposal.

John Roddy of Gaithersburg, Md., is a retired senior litigation attorney for FERC, with more than 30 years of experience in environmental impact statements. He said he felt compelled to address the pipeline proposal as a landowner in the affected area of Pocahontas for 45 years, and as a person deeply familiar with FERC.

“Because this proposal will entail the transportation of natural gas in interstate commerce, the FERC will assume jurisdiction, and its regulations will trump any state standards,” Roddy told The Recorder. “In order to obtain FERC approval, the applicant will have to demonstrate that there is a supply of gas and a known market. In this instance, both are questionable. The source of the gas is an amorphous number of potential, not proven, reserves in the western part of the state. The markets are equally ephemeral. Balanced against this is the near-pristine nature of that area of West Virginia, the Monongahela National Forest. Admittedly, I am an interested party, but I just don’t see it.”

Route a ‘poor choice’

Lynn Cameron, co-chair of the Mt. Crawford-based Friends of Shenandoah Mountain, described the proposed pipeline route as a poor choice.

“As a frequent visitor to Highland County, I cringe at the thought of a gas pipeline going through the Laurel Fork watershed,” Cameron said. “The 10,000- acre tract of Laurel Fork that lies within the George Washington National Forest a short distance downstream is one of the most pristine and biologically rich areas in Virginia. It is home to at least 25 species of plants and animals ranked by the Virginia Division of Natural Heritage as rare in Virginia. Laurel Fork is known for its salamanders, birds, beaver ponds, spruce forest, and exceptional native trout stream. It provides the public with excellent opportunities for birding, hiking, backpacking, and fishing, all of which help support Highland County’s tourism-based economy. “The pipeline route over Shenandoah Mountain is also a very poor choice,” Cameron continued. “The Shenandoah Mountain area lies within a biodiversity hotspot identified by The Nature Conservancy and an outstanding ecological core identified by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. National forest land on Shenandoah Mountain is popular for mountain biking, hiking, fishing, hunting, camping, horseback riding, and nature study.

“The GWNF is a two-hour drive for about 10 million people,” she added. “It serves a critical role for recreation. A pipeline would not only fragment the forest permanently but would also increase the likelihood of industrial gas development by fracking in our national forest and on private land along the route. Heavy industrial development by fracking would damage sensitive natural areas and displace the many recreational uses people now enjoy.”

Tom Long, pipeline issues chair of the Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club’s Shenandoah group, said the chapter is strongly opposed to the proposed project.

Although Dominion has kept details about the Southeast Reliability Project quite vague, it is clear the construction and maintenance of such large-scale industrial pipeline would have devastating consequences for the environment, he said.

Long listed reasons for opposing the project, beginning with the proposed route across nearly 50 miles of hardwood forests of the Monongahela and George Washington national forests, threatening wildlife, water quality, and recreation.

“If the pipeline is built, gas producers will argue that drilling wells in the George Washington National Forest makes sense given the proximity of a distribution line. New wells and fracking will endanger the unique qualities of this magnificent Appalachian forest and further threaten clean water that is perhaps the great treasure of the GWNF,” Long said in a statement.

“The pipeline would cross and blight the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Appalachian Trail, two of Virginia’s great natural tourist attractions. It will also cross a portion of the McDowell Battlefield and other historically significant sites in the commonwealth.”

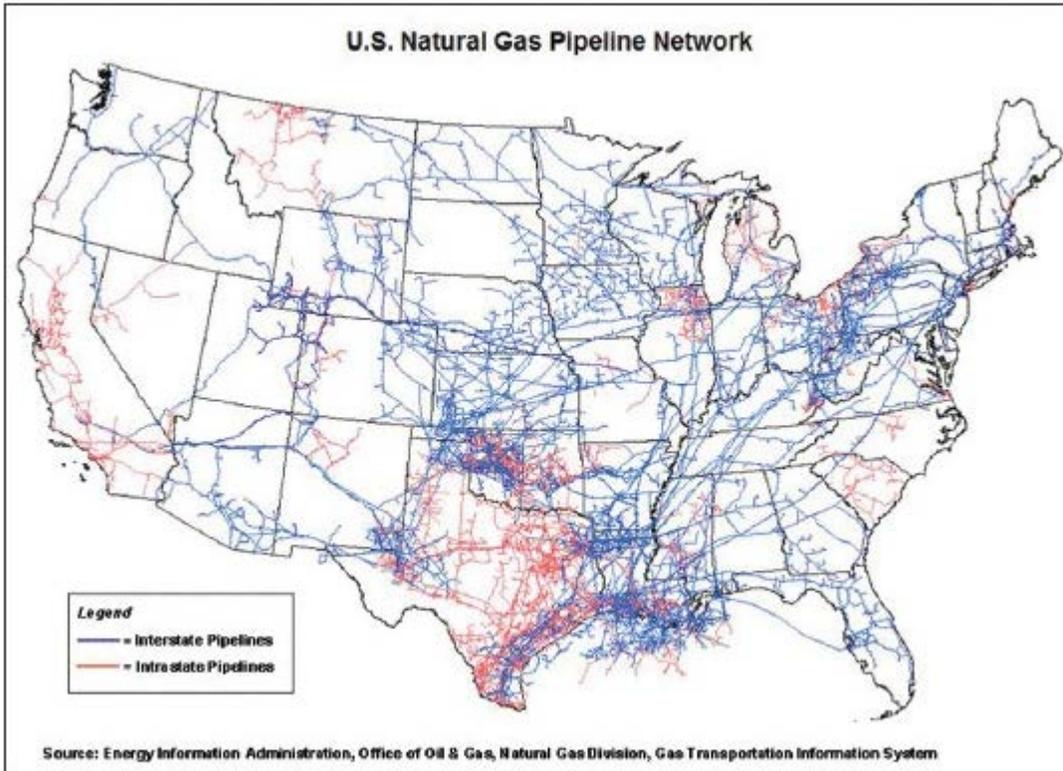
Also, Long said, “The pipeline would not be totally underground and invisible, as some believe. There would be cuts and disturbance of the natural environment. Warning signs, valves, crossings, service roads, and compressor stations would scar the landscape. In just Highland and Augusta counties, the pipeline would cross dozens of streams and rivers, including the Bullpasture, the Cowpasture and, depending on the actual route, the waters or headwaters of the Middle and South rivers. In Virginia, the trunkline and laterals would cross an astonishing 448 bodies of water plus wetlands. Every cut promises increased erosion, runoff, sediment and potential pollution,” he said. “Our farmlands, forests, and conservation easements will be marked forever. Passing through the karst limestone topography typical in western Virginia, the pipeline may fall victim to sink holes or natural caves that could cause leaks or a catastrophic failure.”

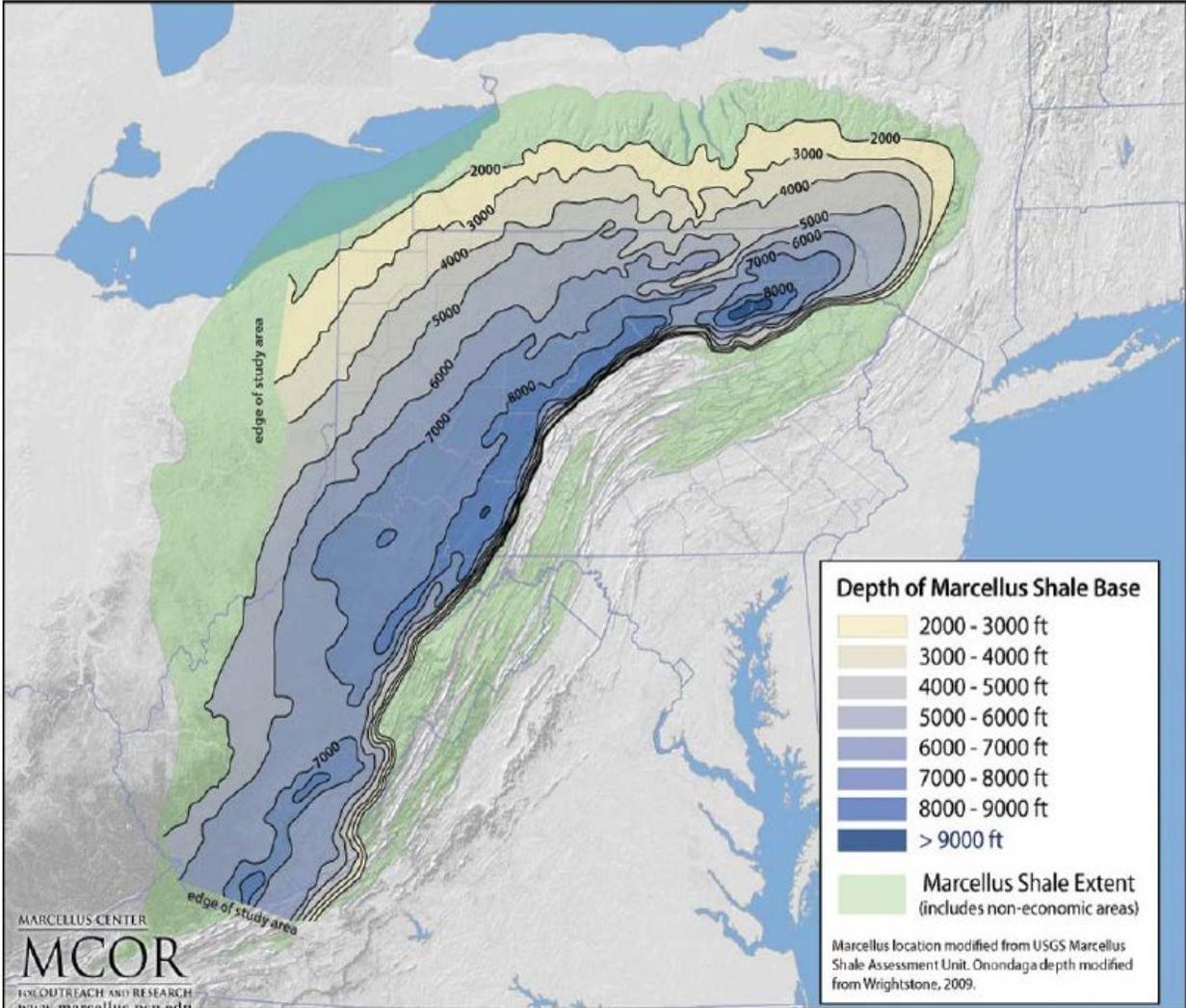
Long believes relying further on natural gas will increase greenhouse gas pollution from Virginia power plants. “Exports of natural gas will increase energy costs at home and greenhouse gas emissions abroad,” he said. “At a time when we need to take significant steps to reduce global warming, Dominion-Virginia Power is proposing a 22-37 percent increase of greenhouse gas emissions over the next 15 years. Instead of trying to apply 19th century solutions to our energy needs, we should be building the energy economy of the future. Other countries and some states are successfully demonstrating that a combination of energy efficiency and renewable energies can reduce energy costs, improve the quality of life, and reduce threats to our health and property caused by global warming. Dominion’s proposal is a giant step backwards that puts company profits ahead of the health and wellbeing of Virginia and the rest of the world.”

Long said the Sierra Club is adamantly opposed to the proposed pipeline “because it poses threats to our environment, the region’s natural and cultural history, and our way of life that cannot be reduced or mitigated by slight changes to the route. The arguments also apply to the competing proposal by Spectra Energy.” Beth Little of Eight Rivers Council in Pocahontas County, a group formed a few years ago because of concern about water, air and land, agreed. “Pipelines are extremely destructive of the natural environment causing erosion, massive disturbance of trout streams, ugly fragmentation of the forest, in other words, damaging all the things that are of value here with no economic benefits to the Highlands except possibly some temporary jobs during construction — if they don’t all go to out-of-state workers — to offset the long term negative impacts. Furthermore, people’s land, air, water, health, peace and quiet — basically their lives — are being ruined by fracking. So anything that would contribute to more fracking, such as a pipeline, is to be deplored.”

Nelson County resident Joanna Salidis said her property is in the pipeline’s path. “I wanted you to know about the Pledge of Resistance to the Dominion Pipeline Facebook page,” she told The Recorder. Nearly 400 “likes” were recorded as of early this week.

Images included with article:





HYDRAULIC FRACTURING

