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Forest service urged to reject survey request

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

ROANOKE — A proposal to survey the George Washington/Jefferson national forest land for a gas pipeline has drawn opposition from environmental attorneys.

Last Wednesday, Greg Buppert, senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, on behalf of several organizations, sent a letter to forest supervisor Thomas Speaks, about Dominion Resources' proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline, and its request to survey forest lands for the project.

Buppert urged Speaks to reject Dominion's request.

"We have grave concerns that the proposed route for the pipeline will cause serious permanent damage to the heart of the GW near Signal Corp Knob and Shenandoah Mountain. The mature, undeveloped forests in this area make it fundamentally incompatible with a major infrastructure development project," Buppert wrote. "Furthermore, we believe that the pipeline project fails to meet the screening criteria set forth in the Forest Service's special use regulations."

Surveying is needed so Dominion can determine the best route for its pipeline.

"In light of its numerous public statements, it is highly likely that Dominion will proceed with an application to build the pipeline across the forest after it completes the survey of the potential route, and the Forest Service should consider the impacts of the entire project at this initial stage. We ask that you reject Dominion's proposal before the company makes further investment in a route across the GW," Buppert wrote.

Buppert explained to Speaks that groups are working on a complete list of potential harm they would expect on forest lands because of the pipeline, but pointed out a few of those concerns in the letter; they included:

- "The pipeline will permanently fragment the truly special forests around Signal Corps Knob and Shenandoah Mountain. This region contains some of the most intact, late successional forest habitat in the entire eastern United States and includes wilderness and potential wilderness areas. The area is an important reservoir of biodiversity for rare species like the imperiled Cow Knob salamander and a popular recreation destination for campers, hikers, hunters, and fishermen. It protects valuable headwater streams that supply downstream communities with drinking water. And it also has numerous significant Civil War sites," Buppert wrote. "We are especially concerned that the pipeline would pass near the Georgia Camp, a Civil War encampment which may contain sites that have not been surveyed.

- The Shenandoah Mountain National Scenic Area, which has been endorsed by more than 200 organizations — "The current pipeline route would cut across the corner of this proposed national scenic area and put a large, disruptive construction project and a permanently cleared right-of-way along its southern border," Buppert explained. "The route would also cross a portion of the Bald Ridge area (also known as the Ramseys Draft Potential Wilderness Area) and two Virginia Mountain Treasures, Signal Corp Knob and Hankey Mountain. The affected portion of Hankey Mountain was originally part of the national scenic area proposal; Friends of Shenandoah Mountain and other members of the GW Stakeholder Group agreed to pull the scenic

area boundaries away from this tract of forest so it could continue to be actively managed for grouse and other desired wildlife.

- Construction and a 200-foot cleared right of way and 75-foot permanent right of way plus access roads to build and maintain the pipeline — “We are also concerned that the pipeline may require a compressor station or other supporting infrastructure in this region in the future,” Buppert wrote. “Construction and the permanent right-of way would degrade the exceptional scenic value of the region; offer a direct avenue into this remarkable forest for invasive species and diseases; pass through portions of the forest that are occupied by the Cow Knob salamander around Signal Corps Knob; and impede essential natural processes, such as migration for amphibians and other small wildlife species. The steep, rugged topography throughout this region of the GW makes it likely that erosion during construction of the pipeline could not be adequately contained. Excessive sediment loads could threaten the integrity of headwater streams that supply much of the water used by the local communities surrounding the forest, including those in the Shenandoah Valley. Sedimentation could also threaten the health of native brook trout streams like Ramsey’s Draft, Laurel Fork, and other exceptional trout waters regarded as some of the best fisheries in the Southeast. Furthermore, we are concerned that the presence of widespread karst terrain in Highland and Augusta counties further increases the likelihood of water contamination or altered water flows from this project.

Buppert also noted Dominion, in its region-wide presentations, has touted its project “as an opportunity for new industrial development.”

“However,” Buppert said, “these communities have expressed a strong preference in their comprehensive plans for development that preserves the natural beauty and environment of this area, in part, because it sustains a locally resilient economy based on agriculture, forestry, tourism, recreation, and business. An undeveloped GW helps support this economy with clean water, timber, scenic beauty, and recreation opportunities.

Further, he said, “We are acutely concerned that the presence of the pipeline through the national forest would make these public lands more desirable for natural gas drilling in the future. The pipeline would remove a significant obstacle to development—the transmission of gas to end users—for as long as it is in the ground. Pressure to develop the GW for drilling may not occur this year, or even in the next ten years, but the pipeline would influence decision-making by drilling proponents in this region for decades.”

Buppert argued that other pipelines in the region do not cross USFS lands, and Dominion cannot claim its proposed pipeline must go through the George Washington National Forest to deliver gas to North Carolina.

“We believe that Dominion prefers a route through the GW and the neighboring Monongahela National Forest because it offers a lower cost and the convenience of dealing with a single large landowner, but that cannot justify the use of some of the region’s best remaining forest habitat on these public lands.

“If the pipeline is built,” he continued, “the national forest and the surrounding communities will bear the full brunt of environmental costs—damage to remote, intact forests; the harm to hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation; and the disruption of the rural character of western Virginia— while sharing in few, if any, of the purported benefits.”

[SELC letter to George Washington National Forest](#)