

TU urges caution as energy companies pursue pipeline project

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BY MARK TAYLOR

A recent sultry summer day found Philip Smith, TU's West Virginia Council chair, in one of his favorite places, a tiny trout stream deep in West Virginia's mountains.

Gingerly, with his homemade split bamboo rod, he cast a tiny stimulator fly to fishy-looking spots, hoping to tangle with a native brook trout.

Fishing Appalachian brook trout streams in the summer requires a careful, delicate, conscientious approach.

And that's also the kind of approach Trout Unlimited and its West Virginia and Virginia councils are insisting that energy companies take when it comes to the task of constructing a proposed natural gas pipeline that, if built, could cross dozens of Appalachian trout streams as it winds from West Virginia to southern North Carolina.

Dubbed the [Atlantic Coast Pipeline](#), the project would be a joint effort between Dominion Resources, Duke Energy and other partners. The 550-mile pipeline would originate in Harrison County, W. Va., and terminate in Robeson County, N.C., near the South Carolina border.

Smith specifically mentioned the Shavers Fork watershed as an area where the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, West Virginia University, Trout Unlimited and others have made incredible gains in helping improve what is becoming one of the top interconnected native brook trout watersheds in the state.

"And Trout Unlimited and the U.S. Forest Service have transformed the upper Greenbrier into one of the most effective stream restoration collaborations in the country," Smith noted. "The pipeline is projected to cut through these and other coldwater streams as it makes an indirect path toward North Carolina."

Native brook trout not only are a valuable recreational resource, but also are a critical indicator species that can help portend threats to the overall health of cold water resources.

According to a [Status and Threats report from the Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture](#), Virginia already has lost all brook trout populations in 38 percent of the species' historical range due to poor land management, outdated grazing practice, roads and other human-related impacts.

Of West Virginia's current brook trout-inhabited subwatersheds, only 1 percent remain fully intact while brookies are completely absent from nearly 60 percent of waters that theoretically should be able to support the species.

Trout Unlimited has made enormous investments in protection, restoration, and recovery of trout waters in both states, for example through projects focusing on the Potomac, Shenandoah and James river headwaters.

Yet the proposed pipeline's path — intersecting three national forests — would cut through some of the best remaining brook trout habitat in central Appalachia. According to the U.S. Forest Service, the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia features more than 600 miles of coldwater streams inhabited by native brook trout.

And the George Washington and Jefferson national forests alone feature more than 1,000 miles of trout streams.

While the proposed pipeline has generated some outright protests, if it moves forward, Trout Unlimited plans to work closely with federal and state agencies and the pipeline companies to ensure that the pipeline and its associated infrastructure do not negatively affect fragile mountain streams or reverse the progress that Trout Unlimited and our partners have made in restoring brookie habitat across these mountain ranges.

“The pipeline's proposed route cuts through three of the East's national forests and some of the most rugged and pristine habitat in the region,” said Elizabeth Maclin, Trout Unlimited's Vice President for Eastern Conservation. “Our top priority is to ensure that these backcountry trout waters are not impacted by this pipeline development.”

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