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State line landowner vows to fight

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER



Goodall points across his farm to the low point in the ridge where he believes the gas pipeline would cross. The ridgeline is on property owned by his neighbor, H.T. “Mac” McBride, who plans to install a wind utility project there. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)

Editor’s note: This is the first in a series of stories about the people who could be affected by Dominion Resources’ proposed 550-mile natural gas pipeline, from West Virginia to North Carolina.

HIGHTOWN — He was using the warm, fall day to work on a broken axle — he hit a rock while mowing a field for a client recently.

“When I’m mowing, after about four hours, I’m in the zone, and I just wasn’t paying attention,” he said.

Pen Goodall started his business, Allegheny Estates, more than a year ago. A lifetime of logging had taken its toll on his body and at 57, he needed to do something easier to make a living.

His son, Miles, is now 18 and graduating from Pocahontas High School this spring; he and his wife are separated, and Monday, he started building a new home for himself as part of his transition to a quieter lifestyle. “I just need the peace and peace of mind now,” he said.

But that peace of mind was upended last spring when Goodall got a letter from a surveying company hired by Dominion Resources.



Goodall wanders among the 100-year-old maple trees and spruces, part of the one patch of woodlands on his farm. Goodall, a former logger by trade, has never cut a single tree on his farm. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)

Dominion and three energy company partners are proposing to build a 550-mile underground natural gas pipeline from West Virginia to North Carolina. Goodall's farm is smack in the pipeline's projected path on the Virginia-West Virginia border.

"I don't know what to do," Goodall said that day. "What am I supposed to do?"

He told the surveyor he would not allow them to enter the farm.



This view, looking toward West Virginia and the Monongahela National Forest, is where Goodall believes the pipeline would enter his place from the west. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)

Goodall's brother, Ches, got a letter, too. The brothers and their family have nearly 1,700 acres called Rifle Ridge — a place with a long history, carefully protected by their father, and later by the Goodall children under a conservation easement with The Nature Conservancy.

Ches Goodall vehemently told surveyors they were not allowed on Rifle Ridge, either.

Thanks to negotiations between the Conservancy, the family, and Dominion, it appears possible Rifle Ridge will be spared pipeline construction. "I'm pretty optimistic," Ches said this week, but if Dominion is going to route the line away from Rifle Ridge, he wants that in writing.

But, Ches said, "It kills me that it would go right through Pen's farm, right through all that pretty red spruce ... all that wetlands on Collins Run. It's a tough situation. I don't know how to deal with it. I want to see our family property protected but not at Pen's expense. His property is its own treasure ... I know that land well."



An aerial view of Pen Goodall's farm situated on the Virginia-West Virginia border at roughly 4,000 feet in elevation. (Photo courtesy Rick Webb)

Pen and Ches Goodall agree on this: If the pipeline crosses Pen's land, it still puts Laurel Fork, a state-protected tier III stream on the family farm, at risk; Pen's farm adjoins the family place, and the stream on Pen's property, Collins Run, feeds into Laurel Fork downstream, where it meanders through Rifle Ridge. The pipeline, as proposed, would have to cross Collins Run, and its surrounding wetlands.

"I wish they would stay higher (with the route)," Ches said. "They should be nowhere near Collins Run."

Pen Goodall recently walked down to the boggy area surrounding the small stream, looking for survey markers that would indicate where Dominion's line might cross through his land. He found one tied to the fence that delineates his place from his neighbor, H.T. "Mac" McBride. Looking over the fence, he could see the markers as they walked up the steep incline across from him, tree to tree.



Goodall stands at new house site, just a few yards away from where he's been digging holes to test for possible perking for a septic system. Just beyond that field, in front of the wooded area, is where the pipeline could come through. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)



Goodall stands in chest-high asters in the wetlands surrounding Collins Run, a tributary of Laurel Fork, which is a state-protected tier III stream. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)

“This is all bog here,” he said, wading through chest-high goldenrod, sorghum and asters.

He hiked back up to a quiet place tucked in across from the stream. “See all these holes? I’ve been looking for a spot that would perk good enough for a septic field, but haven’t found one yet ... I’m still looking for solutions.”

He’s been around and around with the health department, trying to figure out the best way to serve his small, new home. “You know, every one of the septic systems on this mountain would flunk the regulations they have on them now. And yet they can let a pipeline of this magnitude be buried here? It’s lost on me,” Goodall said.

Goodall's house site is nestled into a wooded area with a view to the western ridges. If Dominion proceeds with its plans, that view would include a swath of construction just yards from his new front door.

He pointed to the bog again. "There's so much water in here, enough for my hydro generator," he said. "If you go just three feet down, you get this lush, gray clay full of water ... you know, there are 32 springs on these 98 acres, which is unheard of. I think any big machine would just sink right here."

Goodall recalls years ago, when he first bought the place, he decided to run cattle. "But the cows ate everything down to nothing and it upset me too much," he said. "I got rid of them."

Goodall bought the place from a Mr. Scott in 1983-84 for \$500 an acre.

He pointed across the property line to where trees had been planted in tubes for protection. "That's part of the KREP program," he explained. "The Chesapeake Bay people came up and planted all these trees, all different types, to help with erosion, help the Bay."

The place also has four ponds built in the 1950s by the government as stock ponds. Today, Goodall uses them for a peaceful retreat when he camps.

"Let's see if we can find the survey markers on the other side of the property," he said, working his way around the farm's borders.

He pointed to the small low place in the ridgeline. "That's where it would enter," he said. "And right here, this is where I found a Clovis point. You know, not Indian arrowheads. A Clovis point. It dates back to like 13,000 B.C. I tried to tell the Dominion guys about how they don't understand how much history is here. The Indians were here, yes, but also, we're talking early man ... I've found everything up here in terms of artifacts — jewelry, pottery, spearheads."

He stops the truck and points in both directions. "Now, this is the divide," he said.

At this spot, he explained, water flowing one way enters the Potomac River. Water flowing the other way, into the national forest on the West Virginia side, goes into the Ohio River.

In the wooded area near the top, a small flock of sheep spooked and hustled from beneath the shade trees into open pasture.

"This thing is going to split my property in half. I don't think I'll be able to keep the animals," Goodall said. "There won't be enough land close to the house for them. At least while it's under construction, I guess I won't have any," he said. "I'll lose 75 percent of my pasture."

Walking into the wooded area, Goodall pointed to the hundred-year old maples and 120-foot spruces. "I won't have much woods left when it comes through here," he said. "This is where all the critters live — warblers, golden crowned knights, bear, deer, grouse, turkey, owls, bald eagles, northern flying squirrels — everything."

He pointed down the ridge. “Down there is where they found that golden eagle’s nest,” he said. “And I’ve got every kind of salamander, even the Cheat Mountain salamander, which is endangered. You know what they (Dominion) told me? They said, well, if you find one of those pick it up, throw it in the freezer and put it in a sealed container and send it to us, so we can check its DNA and see if that’s what it is.”

He balled his fists in frustration. “I said, ‘Man, if it is one of those salamanders, then we’ve just wiped another one off the damn planet!’”

Ironically, this longtime logger has never cut a single tree on his farm. “I just let the forest do its thing, the rot and decay and all are good for the salamanders and other things. Oh, and we have snowshoe hares, too. And snowy owls.”

He shrugged with sarcasm. “They said when they cut my trees at least they’ll give me the logs,” he said.

A flicker flew around the knoll before settling on a fence post. Goodall searched the fence line, but could not find any markers. “I guess they’ve got their points laid further back than I can see,” he said. “Right here it will go, but you know, you go down just a little right here in the ground and you hit hardpan. I mean, it’s solid. Can’t drive posts through it.”

He pointed at the narrow dirt drive near his current house. “This is the old Allegheny road. It was a piece of the turnpike that went to Middle Mountain, and there’s a gun emplacement from the Civil War up on Tamarack. And the tombstones on the mountain, that was the Collins family.”

Goodall has a pretty good idea where the route will enter and exit his place because he saw it on a map Dominion provided at its recent open house in Highland County.

“When I was there, this one guy I call the gas company ‘talker’ — I asked him about moving this thing. You know what he said? He said they don’t like to move the gas line very far because it would cost them \$9 million just to move a mile,” he said.

“I thought the open house was OK, though. I think they saw that Highland County isn’t full of dumb people ... but I don’t know what to do and no one has been really helpful.”

Like other landowners who find themselves at a loss for how to handle the situation, Goodall is furious. He will be the first to admit he’s earned himself a reputation around here for being rebellious. He was restless as a young man, though he studied courses in college at N.C. State — horticulture, silviculture, geography.

Currently, Goodall stays with a friend in North Carolina every weekend, taking classes in the herbal and medicinal qualities of plants.

In 2002, Goodall learned about his neighbor McBride’s plan to erect 400-foot wind turbines on the ridge just above his farm. That, too, threatened to destroy the sensitive ecology of the Laurel Fork watershed. Goodall and his family strenuously objected to the project; so far, it has not been built. McBride hasn’t found enough investors, but he told The Recorder recently the wind utility is still in the works.

“Why is it always something?” Goodall asks, as he looks over the ridgelines where he has found peace and solitude. “Why is it always happening to Highland County? Why take the most beautiful place in the world and destroy it? You know, people who live in the city don’t have a clue — the fresh air, the peacefulness. We’ve all lived in cities before, we know what the rat race is. At least here, you can stop and go, wow,” he said, looking out at the expanse of autumn color on the mountains.

He shakes his head. “I don’t know. I guess I’ll have to fight again,” he said.

But like other landowners in Highland, he doesn’t know how. “Do I pay lawyers instead of putting my son through college? It’s heartbreaking. I’ve been here 30 years; I don’t want to leave.”

He has had two personal visits, three phone calls, and at least four letters from the survey company. “They’re trying to tell me that unless I let them on, they won’t know what’s here,” he said. “But then they say, well, they’ll just get a helicopter to fly over to complete their survey line. I’ve tried to be nice, but they keep saying ‘You really need to reconsider. This will be a good thing for the U.S.’ They really don’t care. This is going to be one big scar on my land. They don’t get it.”

Aside from a loss of water quality, Goodall is equally concerned that if Dominion’s pipeline gets installed in Highland County, more industrial development will follow. “What it’s going to do is open the door for just about anything, to other commercial development ... It’s a shame to work your whole life to give something to your son and by the time he grows up, man will have destroyed it all.”

Goodall is not afraid to resist. “Hell, yeah,” he said.

“I told that land guy, ‘I’m willing to fight for my land, are you?’ They’ve got a train full of lawyers. I know they’re running background checks on people ... and I’m already a red flag. But I’m going to wait until they condemn the land, I guess. I saw it happen in North Carolina years ago when they were putting up Jordan Lake. People had been there for hundreds of years ... but they took their land anyway. I don’t want them to take mine, and I guess I’ll have to fight them.”

Goodall wanders back down the meadow to the industrial mowing equipment and its broken axle. “I guess I’ll have to fix this first,” he said.