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Feds told pipeline threatens site

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

RICHMOND — The Virginia Department of Natural Resources has informed federal regulators that biologists have found “a significant natural community” along the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline route in Nelson County.

Nelson is one of the Virginia mountain counties, including Highland, that would be crossed by the corridor that Dominion mapped out for its proposed 550-mile gas transmission pipeline.

DCR advised avoiding a “Central Appalachian Low-Elevation Acidic Seepage Swamp.”

The natural community occurs on groundwater-saturated flats and low slopes along streams in the Ridge and Valley, northern Cumberland Plateau, Northern Blue Ridge, and western Piedmont, at elevations of 700 to 2900 feet, said S. Rene Hypes, project review coordinator, to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission on June 8.

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“Habitats are usually more-or-less narrow and elongate, with hummock-and-hollow microtopography, and frequently with a small ephemeral stream channel running through or adjacent to the community,” Hypes explained to FERC.

“Substrates are poorly drained mineral soils with numerous hydric indicators. The ground surface is slightly sloping, and drainage is usually via small, intricately braided channels with interspersed hummocks.”

The canopy is usually closed, she said, and consists of red maple, black gum, and tulip-poplar. White oak is an important associate in some areas, Hypes continued, and slippery elm, white ash, and sycamore are present in some stands.

“A conservation site has been created for this significant community and named the Beaver Creek Headwaters Conservation Site,” she explained. “Conservation sites are polygons built around one

or more rare plant, animal, or natural community designed to include the element and, where possible, its associated habitat, and buffer or other adjacent land thought necessary for the element's conservation. Conservation sites are given a biodiversity significance ranking based on the rarity, quality, and number of element occurrences they contain, on a scale of 1- 5, one being most significant. Beaver Creek Headwaters Conservation Site has been given a biodiversity significance ranking of B2, which represents a site of very high significance."

Hypes said the pipeline route (the alternative east of Lovington) directly bisects the Beaver Creek site, and an aggressive and invasive plant species, joint head grass, is common in some of the forest near the site.

"The opening of tree canopy and the ground disturbance associated with a pipeline project could potentially act as a vector for the introduction of this or other invasive species," she said.

"Therefore, DCR recommends avoidance of the Beaver Creek Headwaters Conservation Site and associated significant community."

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