

The Recorder

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Don't allow shoddy pipeline construction

If the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline is approved, inspections to prevent environmental damage to our water and land will be critical. But we have no confidence our community will be properly protected. Neither Dominion's subcontractors, state environmental experts, nor federal inspectors have historically doled out preventative plans or construction inspections and resolutions that really work.

The Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition has looked at smaller pipeline projects in other areas and found that, in particular, Virginia's Department of Environmental Quality, which is charged with reviewing erosion and sediment control plans and inspecting during construction, does not have the manpower or resources to do its job.

This week, Highlanders for Responsible Development president Lew Freeman urged county supervisors to take a stand on this issue, asking them to consider a resolution insisting DEQ require erosion and sediment control plans be filed for the pipeline project — and made public.

As we've reported earlier, DEQ has the authority to require Dominion submit a specific plan, but the agency hasn't committed to doing that.

"Whether one is for or against the ACP proposal, I hope you agree that a pipeline built through Highland County should be as environmentally safe as possible," Freeman said.

Most of the organizations concerned with the pipeline project have asked affected county boards to insist DEQ require plans from Dominion. Nelson County was the first to pass a resolution on the issue, and most recently the Virginia Association of Counties expressed legislative support for providing "adequate direction and resources" to DEQ to monitor and enforce these plans on all large-scale utility projects. "DEQ should conduct a review of the annual standards and specifications and construction general permit requirements for those projects to determine if they are providing adequate protection of water quality and natural resources," VACo said.

"HRD does not want to see Highland County be the victim of shoddy environmental practices should the ACP be built," Freeman told the board.

We agree — it's high time Highland join other localities in urging DEQ to wield its authority. If the department doesn't have the resources, then it's time to take steps in next month's General Assembly to fix that, or hand off the authority to an agency that does have the resources and experts to handle it.

HRD's request of our supervisors does not require them to change their "neutral" position on the ACP. All it asks is that they take steps to protect us, their constituents and taxpayers, from construction work that if not well planned, inspected, and monitored, could do untold damage to our waters and soils.

If our county does not take action, that's all the more reason citizens will need to stay involved. Here's one way to do that: Highlanders for Responsible Development is coordinating local participation in Trout Unlimited's Virginia Pipeline Monitoring Program. It will hold an organizational meeting Sunday at the Highland County Public Library, at 2 p.m.

The group hopes to train individuals how to monitor the numerous streams and springs that could be affected by pipeline construction. The data can be used to discover any negative impacts to our waters. As HRD has pointed out, the 125-foot construction corridor for the pipeline would cross more than 25 miles in Highland County, and access roads for it will exceed 30 miles.

The pipeline would cross Laurel Fork, Back Creek, Jackson River, Crab Run, Bullpasture River, Cowpasture River, and Shaws Fork, in addition to recharge areas for many of the county's limestone springs.

That's a lot at risk, and much of it directly affects property owners who depend on their wells and springs for household and farm water.

We know we cannot depend on the state or federal government to protect us; we have to protect ourselves. We urge everyone to join the meeting Sunday and find out how to help.

Meanwhile, Highland supervisors should seriously discuss a resolution; the board has consistently said it would watch out for citizens and landowners if this pipeline gets built. This would be one good way to do that. We deserve to know what the plans are.