

The Recorder

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Dominion pushes back pipeline plan

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER



The critically endangered James River spiny mussel is said to be found in the river's headwaters. (Courtesy U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

MONTEREY — Environmental issues have postponed construction of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

The start has moved from this fall to the summer of 2017, with commercial operation still expected in the fourth quarter of 2018, Dominion announced Friday.

A pipeline company filing Friday answers Federal Energy Regulatory Commission questions from December and January, but does not address the study corridor realignment that impacts hundreds of landowners in Virginia and West Virginia, including 90 in Bath and Highland counties.

The realignment, resulting from U.S. Forest Service route rejections over endangered salamanders, represents about a quarter of the proposed 600-mile pipeline.

Dominion spokesman Aaron Ruby described the 7,000- plus page filing as “an important milestone for the project and provides FERC with the information it needs for the draft EIS.”



Map depicts proposed pipeline access roads in western Highland County on USFS land. (Courtesy Dominion)

The next step is for FERC to set the timeline for the remainder of the environmental review, Ruby said.

“The FERC process has been extraordinarily thorough and comprehensive, and it has allowed us to work closely with agencies and the public to resolve the important environmental issues that have been raised,” Ruby said. “These are important issues, and we’ve devoted a significant amount of time and resources to ensure they are fully addressed. Working through these issues has taken additional time, and we’ve adjusted our plans accordingly to expect a certificate in early 2017. Based on this time frame, we remain confident that we are on track to reach our targeted in-service date in late 2018.”

Acknowledging an endangered fish and shellfish live in the path, Dominion says updated assessments are in progress.

The James River spiny mussel is listed as critically endangered, the highest level of endangerment before extinction. The roughhead shiner is listed as vulnerable, the medium level of endangerment. Siltation and water pollution by particulates are cited as a main reason for both species’ declines. Both live only in James River headwaters.

“None of the stream crossings fall within the boundaries of the George Washington National Forest,” the filing states. “Due to the proximity of some of the stream crossings to the boundaries of the GWNF, an updated mussel survey study plan will be provided to GWNF for review.” A roughhead shiner habitat assessment was in progress.

Altogether, 9.4 million gallons of water would be used from their habitats in Back Creek, Jackson River and Cowpasture River for hydrostatic testing.

The filing states the proposed pipeline would cross about 28 bodies of water, many intermittent, for a total of about 620 feet of water crossing in Bath and Highland. Seven of the waterways are classified as trout habitat. The Coursey Springs State Fish Hatchery on the Cowpasture River in Bath County is about three miles from the pipeline route.

Water impoundments are proposed at Back Creek in Highland, Jackson River and Cowpasture River, both in Bath.

The proposed route in Bath and Highland crosses karst topography, a drinking water source, and is hotly contended by intervening landowners, water scientists, and citizen groups as highly susceptible to pollution.

Dominion's karst assessment and survey are due for completion in the third quarter of this year, according to the filing. Springs along the route are yet to be identified in Highland or Bath counties.

Dominion in February adopted the realignment that modified the proposed crossings of USFS lands in the Monongahela National Forest and GWNF, the filing explains. The company is updating its consistency assessment for this new route based on ongoing consultations with the USFS, and anticipates completing the updated analysis in the second quarter of 2016. The company plans to file updated analyses to FERC and USFS at the same time, Dominion said.

Initial construction activities such as preparing contractor yards and access roads are expected in April 2017. The proposed pipelines would be built along 14 spreads, with construction occurring over an approximate 18-month period beginning in June 2017, the filing states.

According to the filing, Highland County would be the only county along the route to have more than one contractor yard. A yard somewhere north of McDowell and another in Hightown were chosen to accommodate the original route, but are about 10 miles from the new route.

The Recorder is awaiting Dominion's response as to whether new yards would be designated to replace them. Both of the currently designated yards are about 40 acres.

The realignment would take the pipeline 10.6 miles through southwest Highland, 21.6 miles through northeast Bath, and 14.5 miles through USFS land in Virginia, including the Appalachian Trail.

Of 15 access roads counted in Bath and Highland counties, four would cross USFS land.

Dominion said using existing infrastructure or rights of way is not feasible. "The majority of the proposed pipeline facilities will be constructed along a new (greenfield) corridor due to a lack of existing pipeline infrastructure in West Virginia, Virginia, and North Carolina between the proposed receipt and delivery points required for the ACP," the company said. "In some places, there are existing electric transmission lines in the vicinity of the pipeline routes, but these span terrain features, such as steep side slopes, that cannot safely be crossed by a buried pipeline. In total, approximately 75.7 miles (13 percent) of the proposed pipelines are parallel to existing linear corridor facilities, including pipelines, electric transmission lines, roads, and railroads, or are within former surface strip mine areas."