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Pipeline route ‘prescription for disaster’

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — The proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline rerouting should fail because it would endanger karst topography, groundwater, trout streams and protected species, concluded Rick Lambert of the Highland County Cave Survey.

Lambert filed a technical paper with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission last week.

Lambert’s paper, titled “Assessments of Four Karst Systems In Highland-Bath Counties, Virginia along the GWNF-6 Route Of the Proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline,” provides a blistering account of how subterranean features, aquifers, bats and invertebrates could face irreparable harm from Dominion’s pipeline construction on the proposed route through southwestern Highland and northeastern Bath counties.

“The magnitude of the size of this proposed construction project and the race to be the first to be completed is a prescription for disaster for the karst systems along the GWNF 6 route,” Lambert said. “Not only is our national forest system threatened, but the most significant karst area in Virginia.

“While the species of concern are no longer salamanders and flying squirrels, threatened and endangered bats and invertebrates are. No amount of mitigation or compensation by setting aside karst lands for protection elsewhere will make this route acceptable to the Highland County Cave Survey. We request (FERC) deny this route adjustment.”

The paper covers many, but not all, of the karst areas within the proposed pipeline study corridor, starting near Valley Center in the west to the Burnsville area in the east.

The Dever Spring Recharge Area is a roughly 2.5 square-mile area north of Valley Center in southwest Highland County, Lambert explained. “The danger in trenching a few hundred feet north of Dever Spring is that the underground passageways carrying the water from the approximately 170 known karst features, including six known sinking stream points, will be intersected and Dever Spring will be beheaded ... This would diminish the flow to Dever Spring and prematurely discharging the flow from the underground conduits into the surface stream flowing through Valley Center.

“Sediments and pollution laden sediments could be carried in minutes, due to the short distance from the proposed pipeline right of way to Dever Spring,” he said, “impacting not only Dever Spring but the native trout streams it feeds. Plus, the right of way is going over top of a seventh sinking stream and then upstream of it. This type of contamination could not realistically be cleaned up ... The route must either be rejected or the impact to the karst features, Dever Spring, and the native trout streams it feeds ignored.”

Lambert continued, “In karst, some aquatic and terrestrial organisms have adapted to the caves and conduits within karst systems, and their confinement to these systems has created a high degree of specific adaptation to these environments. These organisms’ dependence upon this environment, coupled with their often low numbers, and their tendency for endemism, has created a situation in which they are often highly susceptible to impact and environmental degradation.

“The proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline right of way (would) cross seven bands/ limbs of karst in Highland and Bath counties. Only four of these bands/limbs have been studied where the proposed pipeline route and access roads are proposed to cross the karst,” he said. “The three bands/limbs which have not been studied share the same hydrologic sensitivities associated with the four bands/limbs of karst which have been studied. These shared similarities are also characteristic of all the karst along the entire proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline route. Unfortunately, very few of these karst areas have received detailed study.

“By proposing to place the pipeline right of way on top of Little Mountain, Dominion is not only putting at risk the high mountain Ordovician aquifers recharging Dever Spring, but the Silurian/Devonian aquifers of the west side of Little Mountain,” Lambert said. “Sediments and pollution laden sediments will not only flow down the east side of the mountain into the high mountain aquifer feeding the multiple springs which appear at the head of each hollow, but flow down the west side of the mountain into the high mountain aquifers which feed springs on that side. Crossing mountains, made up of karst, perpendicular to the karst, can minimize the numbers of aquifers and springs impacted. The dangers of beheading and sedimentation from construction to karst springs is well documented (MNF, 1981). The impact to the endangered Indiana bat by removal of documented and undocumented roost trees will only increase the stress White Nose Syndrome has placed on this species.

“The Atlantic Coast Pipeline must not be approved as proposed on Big Ridge or in the Dever Spring Recharge Area. No amount of mitigation or compensation will alleviate this risk,” Lambert said. “The proposed pipeline right of way and access road must not be approved and the route must be moved off the Little Valley karst.”

The Burnsville Cove Significant Karst Area is an approximately 18-square-mile area straddling the Highland-Bath county line near the town of Burnsville, Lambert explained. “It is in the sixth band/limb of karst encountered in the Highland-Bath county area traveling west to east along the proposed pipeline right of way. The cove is characterized by a complex drainage system where under normal conditions all water sinks, and is discharged through four springs along the Bullpasture River, a stocked trout stream, at the northeast end of the cove.

“The Burnsville Cove is considered the most significant karst area in Virginia, (containing) 97 known caves which contain over 80 miles of surveyed passageways. Two of the caves have been declared National Natural Landmarks by the United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service. Fourteen of the caves are listed as significant by the Virginia Speleological Survey and the Virginia Cave Board. Caves in the Burnsville Cove contain federally endangered bats such as the Indiana bat, northern long-eared bat, and the Virginia big-eared bat. They also contain populations of the state listed tri-colored bat, little brown bat (and) no less than six (special) invertebrate species,” he wrote.

The Butler Sinking Creek Cave System contains seven special invertebrate species, he added. Aqua Cave also contains two special invertebrate species. “This cave has also been declared a National Natural Landmark by the United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, and has been designated as a significant cave by the Virginia Cave Board on the recommendation of the Virginia Speleological Survey ... The drainage area the proposed access road passes through drains into Sinking Creek, which has a losing point near the mouth of the hollow, which flows into the Butler- Sinking Creek Cave System. A sedimentation or pollution event in these head waters could travel the entire length of the Aqua Spring recharge area, four miles, affecting this system and the Bullpasture River below Aqua Spring. This type of contamination could not realistically be cleaned up.”