

The Recorder

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No time to let up on process

When the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission issued a draft Environmental Impact Statement on Dominion's proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline project, deadline pressure was added to the shoulders of landowners who have already been carrying a much heavier burden than they should.

FERC will accept comments on the document until April 6. And with more than 2,000 pages included, that will feel like a tight squeeze for citizens — lay people who will sift through a truckload of jargon to figure out what's right, or wrong, and alert the agency to their conclusions.

Fortunately, they have support. Numerous citizens' groups opposed to this project have been working nonstop for more than two years, bringing in experts and scientists and economic advisors who have poured thousands of man-hours into understanding what's at stake. And they have freely shared their information with the rest of us, and with FERC. Their work has made a difference.

In addition, Virginia's natural resource agencies have added their own expertise — and they've done a lot more work than they're often credited for. From the Department of Environmental Quality to the Department of Conservation and Recreation and the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, among others, our state officials have raised serious questions that must be addressed before FERC approves Dominion's application to construct. FERC cannot and should not ignore their calls for more analysis and requests for more information from Dominion.

Arguably the most vocal and important voice in this process to date has been that of the U.S. Forest Service. USFS officials have gone toe-to-toe with Dominion about the impacts to federal lands in the pipeline's path — land that belongs to every U.S. citizen. They have taken a fine-toothed comb to the company's construction management plan, and we expect they will do the same with this draft impact statement. We are grateful — that's quite a chore.

FERC, in its own analyses of environmental concerns, is downright dismissive. The draft EIS reflects a rather cavalier attitude when it comes to the substantive issues raised by the USFS and other agencies, and individuals. FERC doesn't think crossing the steep mountains and sensitive karst terrain with an enormous right of way swath and 42-inch diameter pipe will be much of a problem, for example. They're putting far too much confidence in Dominion's arguments.

The USFS, we maintain, has been the strongest voice of reason. Its officials have a job to do — follow the law and protect the lands for all of us. We are greatly encouraged that USFS staff have made it clear to FERC they have their own regulations and nothing about Dominion's plans can be simply tossed aside to make way.

USFS officials are guided by a management plan — one that takes years to create or revise, involves thousands of people offering input and guidance, and has incredibly strong public involvement. The plan for the George Washington National Forest does not include a utility corridor like the one Dominion needs, which requires the company obtain a special use permit to construct the pipeline.

The USFS has said, quite bluntly, that it cannot change the plan at the whims of Dominion, or FERC for that matter, to accommodate the project. And it will not issue a special use permit to do that until it has proof Dominion can build without major impacts. The USFS told the company, for example, that it must show it can successfully complete its proposed horizontal drilling through the Blue Ridge Mountains before other construction in the national forest would be allowed. That could take a long time, and FERC wants Dominion and the USFS to work things out for a practical schedule.

We urge the forest service to hold its ground on this point, no matter how much political pressure comes to bear. All of us would like some evidence Dominion can do the job right because so far, Dominion has gotten so much wrong. Errors in mapping, lame excuses for surveying mistakes, wimpy responses to questions, if any answers are provided at all, and a record for poor planning and execution on other projects — Dominion's track record leaves little room for just trusting will handle this project well. It's up to citizens, state agencies, the U.S. Forest Service, and yes, FERC, to hold the corporation to account.

We say if the USFS wants to see successful horizontal drilling as a permit condition, Dominion should be required to show it to them. Otherwise, the forest service will be unduly pressured to issue a special use permit before anyone really knows whether Dominion's methods for tearing up our land will actually work.

In addition, the forest service cannot change its forest management plan without substantially more information, which it has requested numerous times from Dominion. Now, FERC is telling us that its process for environmental review should provide the missing details. But the USFS has reminded FERC that forest management comes under its own rules, and its own process must be followed. We agree. Those plans were created for a reason, and reflect what citizens believe is best for our lands. FERC should not be allowed to railroad USFS officials. Don't let that happen.

For those of you who felt the draft EIS was a green light for this project, shake it off. This is a long process and there are hundreds of complexities yet to be sorted out. You have support. Your voices matter. This is only a draft document, and it's full of mistakes and inconsistencies. Banding together, we can make our comments count.

Don't let the sound of a ticking clock unnerve you. Let's forge ahead.

