

The Recorder

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2017-04-27 / Top News

Pipeline foes feel fear, burning rage

By John Bruce • Staff Writer



“Here’s what I say to you, Dominion, and the Atlantic Coast Pipeline. You think you’re going to get this land. Come and take it. We’ll be ready for you,” Averitt said.

MONTEREY — Outcries this week from a fearful Highland County native and an incendiary Nelson County landowner added fuel to mounting protest over the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

Highland County native Jessie Gutshall grew up around the karst topography of Valley Center. She was relieved to hear from The Recorder during a telephone interview that the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission instructed Dominion to avoid routing its proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline through her homeplace. But she was doubtful the agency would have much influence over the outcome because of the investor-owned utility’s wealth and political power.

“I’m an animal lover, and it kills me,” Gutshall said of the proposal. “It’s unbelievable that would happen.”

As a child named Jessie Bird growing up in Valley Center, Gutshall remembers a chicken coupe seemed to be making strange noises. It was a sound hard to describe, like rocks and water

moving. When she saw mounds of grass moving to the sides, she ran away as fast as she could. It wouldn't be the only time she witnessed formation of what she would later learn to be sinkholes.

“Another sinkhole went down nearby. There's a place on the side of the road where us kids would throw rocks in a hole, and it would take 30 seconds to hit the water. Later it was filled with rocks to keep animals from falling in.” (A freefall calculation suggests an object could fall thousands of feet in 30 seconds, including time for the sound to travel back.)

“I think Dominion doesn't care about the workers. Somebody's going to get killed up there. I can't understand why they are going to put a pipeline in a place that is so bad — for them and for us.”

She and her husband, who now live in Goochland County, own 20 acres and a white, four-gable, two-story house on Valley Center Road adjoining the CCC Road.

Because underground waters are interconnected, Gutshall wonders if the proposed pipeline's disturbance of karst would affect the pools at Warm Springs and the baths at Hot Springs.

Lew Freeman of Hightown, chair and executive director of the Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance, recommended what he described as a “powerful” five-minute video of Richard Averitt, a Nelson County landowner who has launched the “burn your easement challenge.”

In the video, Averitt, whose property the proposed pipeline would bisect, argued Dominion offered him roughly \$13,000 for land on which the company would make an estimated \$1.6 million over the next 20 years. He then took the easement contract from a folder, crumpled it, threw it to the ground and set it afire while encouraging other landowners along the proposed route to act likewise.

“Let them know you're not going to take this, right? That's what we're doing here today. And here's what I say to you, Dominion, and the Atlantic Coast Pipeline. You think you're going to get this land. Come and take it. We'll be ready for you,” Averitt said.

In an email, Freeman urged recipients to forward the link to the video to “send it to others: landowners, those on the fence, officeholders, etc.”

To view the video, visit the ABRA Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/abralliance>.