

# The Recorder

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## Hikers visit old forest in the Dominion pipeline path

By Geoff Hamill • Staff Writer



*Hikers take pictures from atop Miracle Ridge on Saturday. (Recorder photo by Geoff Hamill)*

LITTLE VALLEY — Three dozen hikers climbed steep slopes near Bolar Saturday to reach Miracle Ridge, where Dominion Resources plans to build a 42-inch natural gas pipeline.

The hikers oppose the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline and visited the ridge to see mature trees that will be razed if the federal government approves the project. Dominion, if permitted, will have the power to forcibly obtain Miracle Ridge from its owners and clear cut a forest that has been growing since before the War of 1812.

Miracle Ridge bisects Bill and Lynn Limpert’s 120-acre home place near Bolar. The Limperts were shocked and saddened when Dominion routed the proposed project through their property.

“The pipeline would cut our property in half and it would travel over 3,000 feet over Miracle Ridge, which is an old growth forest,” said Bill. “It would cause our property value to drop by

more than 50 percent. It would put our safety in danger. We would be well within the blast zone of the pipeline. We and a number of our neighbors here in Little Valley would be trapped at the head of the valley in the evacuation zone with no chance of escape or rescue.”



*Bill Limpert leads a hike toward Miracle Ridge on Saturday. The hikers visited an area of mature forest that would be clear-cut if the federal government allows construction of the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline. (Recorder photos by Geoff Hamill)*

Environmental groups have stressed the danger to water sources posed by the proposed pipeline, which Dominion has plotted across dozens of sensitive waterways in Bath and Highland counties. Compounding that danger, according to

experts, is the porous karst limestone subsurface. Karst is a landscape formed from the dissolution of soluble rocks such as limestone, dolomite, and gypsum, characterized by underground drainage systems with sinkholes and caves.



*Visitors take a photo by a 205-year-old maple tree on Miracle Ridge.*

“It could easily cut off our water supply,” said Limpert. “All of us here in Little Valley and the entire route of the pipeline through Highland and Bath counties have no public water. We have karst terrain with limestone soils. Construction of the pipeline could easily silt up those limestone channels or collapse those channels with the extensive blasting that would be required. Our water supply could be ruined with no liability to the pipeline company.”

The Limperts have been active with regional pipeline opposition groups.

Jennifer Lewis, a leader of Friends of Augusta, learned of the couple's plight and organized Saturday's hike.



*Bill Limpert burns a document sent to him by Dominion Resources with a proposal to purchase an easement across 3,000 feet of his property.*

If the federal government allows construction of the proposed Atlantic Coast pipeline, Dominion will be granted the power to forcibly obtain the easement through eminent domain. (Recorder photos by Geoff Hamill) "After they told me the story of their really old trees, I just knew I had to come see them," said Lewis. "I thought I should invite a lot of other people to come see the trees, too. I put the word out and it instantly filled right up, so we've planned a second hike."

Bill Limpert classifies the forest on Miracle Ridge as "old-growth." Although one definition of old-growth is virgin forest that has never

been felled, another is a forest that has attained great age, at least 120 years, without disturbance.

Old-growth forests may be dominated by species such as sugar maple, white spruce, or white cedar that are capable of reproducing under a shaded canopy. These old-growth forests can persist indefinitely. The forest on Miracle Ridge is dominated by maple and oak.

"We believe some of the trees are 400- 500 years old," said Limpert. "We haven't been able to verify that. We had Mark Simms, a forester from Staunton, come out and he measured some of the smaller trees. One of the smaller trees, a 17-inch diameter red oak, he measured at more than 205 years old. A number of the trees are four feet in diameter. His increment borer was not large enough to get to the inside of a tree that size, to be able to count it. He believes that many trees are much older than the 205-year-old.

"We checked with the forest service, and they don't have an increment borer big enough to check a tree that large. In fact, they told me, 'We've never checked a tree like that because we've never cut a tree that big down.'"

Limpert estimated 500 trees with a circumference of at least six feet will be cut on his property if the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission approves Dominion's pipeline application.

"In the first 300 feet of the project through our property, we've measured 50 trees that are over six feet in circumference," he said. "I'm sure all of those are over 200 years old."

Forty hikers climbed Miracle Ridge Saturday. Limpert noted the engineering difficulties of building a pipeline safely on such steep slopes, and pointed to the nearly vertical western slope of the ridge, where the landowner said Dominion will dump overburden. The slope descends to a pristine, cascading waterway below.

Artist Katie Feild traveled from Baltimore for the hike. “It’s amazing to be around things that have survived that long,” she said. “In places like Baltimore, it’s so heavily developed, things that are growing are very young and temporary. These old trees are magical.”

Feild finds it difficult to believe a pipeline project could reduce Miracle Ridge to a flattened, clear-cut strip of grasses and shrubs. “It’s ridiculous that this is a possibility,” she said. “It just seems obscene, being able to sloppily move through these areas like these big companies do, and it’s just wrong.”

Feild was accompanied by fellow artist Kate Wyer, also of Baltimore. “We left Baltimore at 5 a.m. because I wanted to come out here and experience this forest and the community of people who care about protecting the land,” said Wyer. “It’s been really, really impactful. I’m so glad we made the trip. Getting to hear about the landowners’ struggle and everything they’ve been through already with Dominion, the legal issues and the intimidation and the bullying — it just gives me more incentive to fight.”

Wyer said responsible federal officials should visit Miracle Ridge. “If they were to walk through these lands, how could they possibly fathom cutting them down and bringing in toxic gas? How could you possibly come in and want to remove tops of mountains, cut down ancient trees and risk drinking water?”

Kenda Hanuman traveled three hours from Buckingham for the hike. “This is virgin land,” she said. “How can we justify taking it for something that is going to be of such limited use to us? We know that the fracked gas is not going to last indefinitely. We know that alternative energy sources, such as solar, are so viable right now and producing income and giving people jobs. To settle for something that is not only destructive, but also a negative economic driver, is just ridiculous.”

Friends of Buckingham director Chad Oba said the proposed pipeline is intentionally routed through areas with vulnerable, low-income populations. “The only compressor station in Virginia is planned for Buckingham County,” she said. “They stuck us with the only one because it’s 95 percent African-American. It’s very much an environmental justice issue. My heart is at both ends of this. Every aspect of this pipeline is wrong. From need, to impact on people and environment, our wildlife — everything is wrong.”

Lewis condemned Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe, who stated unqualified support for the proposed pipeline before any independent analysis of the project’s impact had been conducted. “It’s a slap in the face to everyone who voted for him, including myself,” she said. “He ran as this ‘green governor’ and those were his words. He said he would be Virginia’s green governor. It’s a shame. He should take the time to meet with landowners and see how this is destroying their lives. Bill and Lynn have been fighting this every day for the last three years and they are

worn down. But individual citizens don't matter to the governor, just corporations. For-profit Dominion can give him campaign donations and everyone bows down to Dominion. Gov. McAuliffe and all other politicians taking money from Dominion — we are not going to stand for it anymore.”

The Limperts were gratified to have a larger than expected turnout for the hike. “It was very heartwarming for so many people to come out here and support us,” said Bill. “It’s a bittersweet experience for us. It’s been very tough, but all the support we’ve gotten from the public is the sweet part of it. We appreciate all the help that everyone’s given us and we’re not going to relent. We’re going to fight this pipeline.”

A second old-growth forest tour on Miracle Ridge is scheduled for Saturday, May 27 at 10 a.m. More information can be found on the Friends of Augusta Facebook page.