

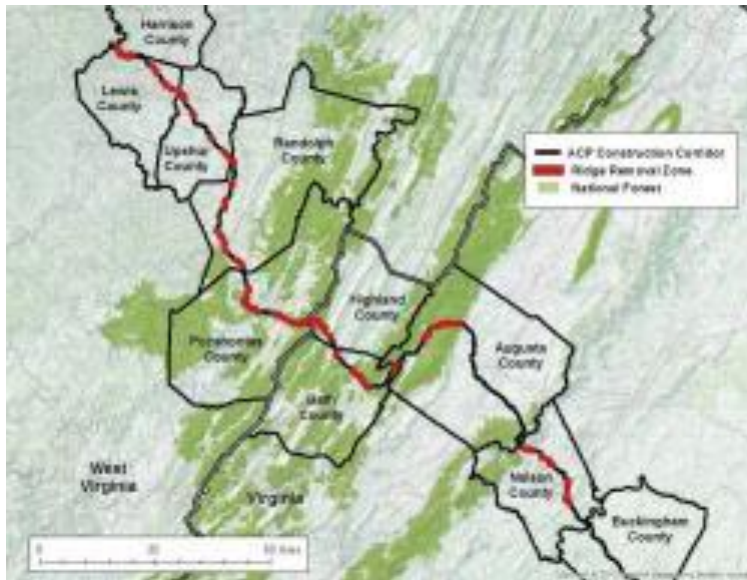
# The Recorder

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## Mountaintop removal argued in pipeline plan

By John Bruce • Staff Writer



*Red areas show mountaintop removal on proposed pipeline route. (Courtesy Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition)*

MONTEREY — “Permanent, irreversible alterations of geologic conditions.”

That’s the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission’s official assessment of how building the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline would affect the Appalachian landscape.

Pipeline company Dominion and project opponents argued last week about whether the proposed ACP would require permanent removal of 38 miles of scenic and ecologically sensitive tree-lined mountaintops equally split between Virginia and West Virginia.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission contradicted itself by implying mountaintop removal is an acceptable practice. “The majority of impacts from construction and operation of the ACP, when added to the impacts of other projects, would not result in a significant cumulative impact on the environment,” the Dec. 30, 2016 draft environmental impact statement concluded.

A rapid-fire discourse last Thursday, April 27 put Dominion at odds with opponents over mountaintop removal.

Meanwhile, the financial services community looked the other way and prompted investors to buy Dominion shares. Zacks upgraded Dominion to “buy” last month, a few weeks after downgrading to “sell” when commenting, “completion of ongoing projects within the stipulated time and budget is a cause of concern.”

With its upcoming annual shareholder meeting next Wednesday, May 10, the Dominion majority owned ACP held a press briefing April 27, but The Recorder was not notified, as requested. Diane Leopold, president and CEO of Dominion Energy, delivered prepared remarks subsequently published on the corporate website expressing urgent need for the project and describing FERC’s environmental review as having “left no stone unturned.”

*‘Confident of successful outcome’*

The investor-owned utility executives did not mention the project, announced three years ago, has met delays, re-routings adding 50 miles, and cost hikes exceeding one-half billion dollars.

“We are committed to seeing this project through, and we are confident of a successful outcome,” Leopold said.

Dominion executives failed to reference mountaintop removal, nor how the company would dispose of up to 3 million tons of excess stone after ridge contours are restored, but they depicted the project’s regulatory process as favorable.

“It has received a thorough and exhaustive environmental review, which has resulted in a project with fewer impacts on the environment and landowners. We believe the process has worked, and it will lead to a final approval this fall,” Leopold said.

Responding to a citizen group website posting the same day, Dominion officials denied the notion of mountaintop removal, saying a trench for the ACP would be blasted to dimensions limited to eight feet wide and deep.

Rick Webb of the Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition countered Dominion spokesman Aaron Ruby, who said, “The assumption that ACP will cut away a full 125 feet is wrong ... Without the assumption, the rest of the analysis falls apart.”

Webb, a retired University of Virginia water scientist who has followed the project in detail, insisted both FERC and Dominion have documented the 125-foot work area width requires large-scale blasting and mountaintop removal.

“Dominion has repeatedly indicated that the width of the construction corridor will be at least 125 feet, and in many places it will be wider, depending on the need for additional temporary work space,” Webb argued. “The public has not yet had access to the actual construction plans for the ACP in Virginia, so we are still waiting to see. We have, however, seen the plans for West Virginia, and the depicted construction corridor width on ridgelines is indeed 125 feet or more.”

### *'Irrevocable harm'*

“One of the longest mountaintop-removal sections in Virginia is in western Highland County, where approximately two miles of ridgeline in the George Washington National Forest would be removed,” Webb said. “Drainage from this area will affect two of Virginia’s remaining native brook trout streams. Brook trout require clean water and sediment-free streambeds. These trout streams, like many other streams and water supplies in the pipeline path, are at risk.”

Blasting away rocky ridgetops would produce excess backfill, after rubble is deposited to follow the original ridgeline where the pipe would be buried. No one has said where an estimated 2.47 million cubic yards of fractured rock, enough to bury a football field nearly a half-mile deep, would go, the coalition argued.

Heretofore, coal mining companies, and not pipeline companies, have dumped the rubble from mountaintop removal in valleys, burying river headwaters, the coalition noted in its paper released last week shortly after the Dominion briefing. “The facts (are) mountaintop removal is not just for coal anymore,” the coalition said.

“With this new information, the debate is settled: The ACP — and (Mountain Valley Pipeline) — will cause irrevocable harm to the region’s environmental resources,” the coalition said.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the excess rubble from mountaintop removal is “disposed of in adjacent valleys because the broken rock will not all fit back into the mining pit, and disposal alternatives are limited.”

EPA lists mountaintop removal environmental impacts to include the following effects:

- Springs and ephemeral, intermittent and perennial streams are permanently lost with the removal of the mountain and from burial under fill;
- Concentrations of major chemical ions are persistently elevated downstream;
- Degraded water quality reaches levels that are acutely lethal to organisms in standard aquatic toxicity tests;
- Elevated selenium levels, reaching concentrations that have caused toxic effects in fish and birds;
- Macroinvertebrate and fish communities are consistently degraded;
- Forests are fragmented; and
- Conversion of habitats (i.e., forest to grasslands) result in displacement or loss of species.

### *Leveling the work area*

“The choice to build along ridgelines is part of Dominion’s preferred and deliberate design,” the coalition said. “Working on these ridgelines will require creating a wide and flat surface to allow Dominion’s earth-moving vehicles and deep-trenching machines to operate and maneuver. The federal government’s report on the environmental impacts of the pipeline declares that ‘narrow

ridgetops (will) require widening and flattening in order to provide workspace in the temporary right of way.’

“This bland statement belies the truth: mountains will need to be decapitated for Dominion to build this pipeline. According to the FERC report, Dominion will require a 125-foot-wide construction right of way in these areas. Dominion’s contractors will need to ‘level the right of way surface to allow operation of construction equipment.’

“When hard bedrock is encountered, which is likely to be the case on these weather resistant ridgetops, ‘blasting may be required to fracture the rock.’ Where blasting is not necessary, Dominion will fracture and excavate the bedrock using heavy construction equipment. Approximately 38 miles of mountains in West Virginia and Virginia would see 10 feet or more of their ridgetops removed in order to build the Atlantic Coast Pipeline ... These calculations were made using the National Elevation Dataset from the U.S. Geological Survey and taking into account the required 125-foot right of way, slope steepness, and the width of impacted ridgelines. The majority of these mountains would be flattened by 10 to 20 feet, with some places along the route requiring the removal of 60 feet or more of ridgetop,” the coalition explained.

“Building the ACP on top of these mountains will result in a tremendous quantity of excess material, known to those familiar with mountaintop removal as ‘overburden.’ Before construction can begin, all topsoil and vegetation must be removed to clear the 125-foot-wide construction right of way. Next, contractors would reduce the height of the mountain using explosives and heavy construction equipment to create a flat surface for working and storage. Then the company would dig trenches 30 feet wide and eight feet deep. Excavations could be deeper at ridgeline crossings. The 42-inch-diameter pipeline would displace much of the excavated soil and rock. Moreover, a cubic yard of earth measured in its natural position grows to more than a cubic yard after it is excavated. This phenomenon is known as ‘swell.’ Dominion proposes to ‘restore all areas as close as practicable to their preconstruction contours.’ What is practicable in this extreme case? Engineers studied a two-mile-long ridgeline along the route.

*Where would it go?*

The coalition continued, “After Dominion finishes re-applying the massive amounts of damaged rock and earth to the ridgeline — known as ‘backfilling’ — these experts concluded that 130,000 cubic yards of excess spoil would remain (from) the overburden from building the pipeline on just two miles of ridgeline. Assuming that the remaining 36 miles of ridgetops share a similar profile, Dominion would need to dispose of 2.47 million cubic yards of overburden, just from these 38 miles. Standard commercial dump trucks that could reasonably operate in this terrain can carry up to 10 yards of material. These fully loaded dump trucks would need to take at least 247,000 trips to haul this material away from the construction site.

“This astonishing number does not even take into account the excavation of the rest of the corridor and access roads on side slopes. Numerous engineers who have looked at this issue have asked the obvious question: What does Dominion plan to do with the tremendous amount of overburden? Dump it into surrounding valleys as companies do with mountaintop removal for coal? Truck it off the mountains with massive dump trucks? And take the massive amounts of rock and soil to what location?” the coalition asks.

“Moreover, the term ‘practicable,’ as defined by the FERC report, means ‘available and capable of being done after taking into consideration cost, existing technology, and logistics in light of the overall purpose of ACP.’ Clearly, the process of decapitating 38 miles of ridgetops will not allow Dominion to ‘restore’ these mountains to anything resembling their original geological and ecological state. As the federal government itself said in its review, ‘Construction on steep slopes would result in permanent, irreversible alterations of geologic conditions,’” the coalition said.

The news has not fazed the financial services community. Barclays PLC upped Dominion’s target price by 14.78 percent. Zacks Investment Research upgraded Dominion from a “sell” rating to a “buy” rating. Deutsche Bank AG increased its price target on Dominion and gave the company a “hold” rating.

### *Pipeline’s need questioned again*

Filed Monday, Dominion’s 15-year integrated resources plan fails to lay out a clear path forward for energy plans in Virginia, or address the question of the need for the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, the Southern Environmental Law Center said in a news release Monday.

“Rather than deliver a clear energy plan, this document only serves to raise more questions about what Dominion really wants to do over the long-term and who really stands to benefit,” said Will Cleveland, SELC attorney. “While Dominion is taking a good step toward expanding solar, they are simultaneously taking two steps back by doubling down on dirty fossil fuels,” Cleveland said. Dominion’s load forecast again is out of line with Mid-Atlantic grid operator PJM. Inflated projections justify Dominion’s plans for building unnecessary power plants and pipelines, SELC said.

The leading fuels to generate electricity were natural gas at 36 percent, and coal at about 20 percent for 2016, trailed by renewables at 1.5 percent. One of several various scenarios by 2030 would put the fossil fuel natural gas on top at half, followed by nuclear at 27.5 percent, then coal at 18 percent and renewables at 9 percent.

“It becomes more and more clear that Dominion is using the Atlantic Coast Pipeline to paint its customers into a corner,” said Greg Buppert, SELC senior attorney. “Locking Virginians into another enormous capital investment and another 70 years of fossil fuel doesn’t make sense.”

SELC, as it has since 2009, plans to intervene in the State Corporation Commission proceeding that will be opened to review the company’s IRP and to collect the data and assumptions underlying the (resource plan) to get a clearer picture of Dominion’s energy plans for Virginia.

To access the resource plan, go to: [www.dom.com/library/domcom/pdfs/corporate/2017-irp.pdf](http://www.dom.com/library/domcom/pdfs/corporate/2017-irp.pdf).

To view the April 27 Dominion briefing text, access: [atlanticcoastpipeline.com](http://atlanticcoastpipeline.com).

To see the coalition’s paper on mountaintop removal, access: [pipelineupdate.org](http://pipelineupdate.org).

To view the EPA’s findings concerning mountaintop removal, go to: [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov).