

The Recorder

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Bath & Highland Counties – Virginia

Proposed pipeline project hits 5-year mark

By Staff | on May 23, 2019

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER



The Pipeline Air Force photographed construction in West Virginia. (Courtesy Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition)

MONTREY — Five years have passed since Dominion Energy publicly proposed a gas transmission pipeline from northwest West Virginia to southern North Carolina.

Originally scheduled for construction in 2017, the project is on hold. It has mushroomed in estimated cost by 87.5 percent, from \$4 billion to \$7.5 billion, and expanded from 550 miles to 600 miles.

The stated purpose has changed from strictly delivering gas for power generation in Virginia and North Carolina to include powering South Carolina and shipping gas overseas from the pipeline's sibling project, the Cove Point Export Facility in Maryland.

The Recorder offers the following timeline beginning this week, documenting its coverage in Bath and Highland counties of political and environmental challenges the project faces, to look back at how the controversial project has evolved over the last five years. This is part one of the summary.

May 2014



Kevin Bowman, environmental protection specialist, sat at the head table at a FERC scoping meeting in Elkins, W.Va. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

- Highland officials learn Dominion is planning a \$4 billion interstate shale gas pipeline, and it could cross about 20 miles of Highland County. The Recorder is first in the region to break the news.
- Landowners receive letters asking to survey their properties.
- According to information provided to supervisors, Dominion “is pursuing a natural gas pipeline project, to be known as the Southeast Reliability Project. Our proposed project would deliver some of the abundant natural gas supplies from the Marcellus and Utica shale basins to serve existing and growth markets for energy in the Mid-Atlantic region,” the company said.
- Highlanders for Responsible Development announces it will have an active voice in the project.

June-July 2014

- Dominion confirms it considers a pipeline proposed by Spectra Energy to be in competition with its own pipeline proposal. The Dominion pipeline would cross Highland County; Spectra's would not.



Dominion maintained pipeline colocation with the existing transmission line right of way in Highland was unfeasible. (Recorder photo by John Bruce)

- McChesney “Ches” Goodall III advises Dominion to stay away, explaining his family owns 1,683 acres in northwestern Highland County adjoining the Monongahela National Forest.
- Pipeline survey notifications are mailed to Highland landowners along a study corridor cutting at least 900 acres, consisting of a 300-foot-wide swath across the middle of the county.
- Highland supervisors await information about the pipeline that is not quite so “embarrassingly vague,” as one staff member put it.

August 2014

- The proposed north-south Spectra Energy Pipeline Project is on hold. “Spectra Energy is suspending its development work on the proposed Carolina project,” Spectra spokesman Arthur Diestel said. “However, we will be analyzing other opportunities in the region.”
- “The gorilla in the room is eminent domain,” supervisor Kevin Wagner says in a briefing with Dominion. “What experience does Dominion have with eminent domain,” and what law firms does it employ? he asked. “We don’t want to get there,” Dominion spokesman Chet Wade responds. “Ninety-five percent of the time, we don’t.”
- Nearly 100 people attend a Highlanders for Responsible Development meeting with a legal briefing by Southern Environmental Law Center attorney Greg Buppert and scientist Rick Webb.

September 2014

- Dominion, Duke Energy, Piedmont Natural Gas and AGL Resources form a joint venture to build and own the proposed and now renamed Atlantic Coast Pipeline. The partnership, called Atlantic Coast Pipeline LLC, would own the pipeline initially proposed by Dominion.
- Lewis Freeman of HRD reports an opposition group leader in Nelson County said a decision was “imminent.” That’s not the case, according to Dominion spokesman Jim Norvelle. “Our chairman, Tom Farrell, said in late July that he expected a decision within 60 days. We are still on that schedule,” Norvelle tells The Recorder.
- Disagreement surfaces over the effects of building in karst topography. “When shallow karst surface features such as sink holes, cave entrances or sunken areas with standing water are encountered, Dominion would avoid it because of constructibility issues,” company spokesman Frank Mack says. The comprehensive plan map shows karst formations on Lantz, Monterey, Jack and Bullpasture mountains. “To me, it sounds like we have Dominion representatives who know nothing about karst answering questions about karst,” says local cave expert and Virginia Cave Board member Rick Lambert of Monterey.
- Dominion confirms local access to shale gas could cost well in excess of \$5 million.
- The Highland County Planning Commission agrees to pursue controls over pipelines and fracking. This is the first time planners have considered Dominion Resources’ proposed 550-mile project, and how Highland could be protected.

October 2014

- The Allegheny-Blue Ridge Alliance forms, consisting of more than two dozen organizations that share concern over the pipeline. Freeman, alliance chair, explains members have agreed not to take a position but to share information. He notes Webb heads a parallel group called the Virginia Pipeline Monitoring Coalition.

- Dominion applies for a special use permit from the Monongahela National Forest.
- Monterey Mayor Rich Holman hands out an essay on karst topography and its vulnerability to gas pipeline construction at the town council meeting.
- To questions on construction staging areas providing space for unloading, laydown and temporary storage of equipment and supplies, the areas would be as close as possible to the work site, Dominion spokesman Norvelle says.
- The Highland County Economic Development Authority responds to a request from supervisors to look into providing landowners with information about what they can expect in terms of a pipeline right of way crossings.
- The Dominion Pipeline Monitoring Coalition announces it will use volunteers to monitor the project from the ground, and from the air, with its “Pipeline Air Force.”
- USFS District Ranger Pat Sheridan says the forest service will make a decision on whether to issue a right-of-way special use permit to construct the pipeline, based on the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission’s environmental analysis.
- Dominion launches its federal regulatory process with a pre-filing to FERC.

November 2014

- Dominion seeks landowner permission to avoid court proceedings by mailing registered letters to landowners who deny permission to survey their property, including five Highland landowners. One, Pen Goodall, says he does not intend to grant permission. “It’s my land,” he says.
- Dominion agrees to comply with a consent order and pay fines after West Virginia’s environmental regulators cite multiple water pollution law violations, with what one West Virginia official termed “very sloppy work.”
- Dominion says it expects full operation through Highland in 2020, and says the county would receive \$603,700 in pipeline tax income.
- A county sponsored forum is held with pipeline experts who tell landowners to know their rights and do their homework on eminent domain.
- Dominion looks at different routes for the pipeline, including avoiding some of historic Dividing Waters Farm in Hightown.

January 2015

- Dominion files lawsuits against four Highlanders who did not allow company representatives on their property to survey.
- Del. Richard “Dickie” Bell is the first state-level political figure to take issue with the project route and puts a related bill before the General Assembly.

- Monongahela National Forest opens a public comment period through Feb. 13 to consider survey work.
- State Sen. Emmett Hanger of Mt. Solon proposes legislation similar to Bell's.
- Worries over groundwater, security, scenic views, business practices and more are voiced during Dominion's Open House in The Highland Center. Mayor Rich Holman says Dominion has not answered his question about an assurance of water for the town's municipal system customers.
- Highlanders for Responsible Development is among a chorus of organizations requesting the U.S. Forest Service to prohibit Dominion from surveying in the George Washington National Forest.
- Dominion asks to go beyond legal open-trench length limits of 500 feet during construction.

February 2015

- The ACP would be the greatest economic force in Virginia and North Carolina, according to speakers in a Dominion-sponsored teleconference.
- The Highland County Planning Commission recommends supervisors amend the zoning ordinance to make oil and gas exploration, extraction, and pipelines subject to the conditional use permitting process.
- Atlantic Coast Pipeline LLC again asks landowners in Highland, as well as Randolph and Pocahontas counties, W.Va., for permission to survey their land now that the company is looking at a potential alternate route for the proposed pipeline. It would cut eastward across Mill Gap, cross U.S. 220 near Mustoe, and trace across upper Big Valley and the middle section of Bullpasture River Valley toward its same eastern egress point, about two miles south of U.S. 250 on the west shoulder of Shenandoah Mountain, again across GWNF. Dominion says both the alternate route and the "preferred" route involve the Monongahela National Forest.
- Highlanders for Responsible Development calls on the USFS to reject pipeline survey applications to the Monongahela National Forest. Additionally, HRD asks for rejection of an application to Jefferson National Forest for the Mountain Valley Pipeline.
- A U.S. Department of Energy study finds fewer new interstate pipelines will be needed to meet the demand for natural gas. The study does not rule out expanding pipeline infrastructure altogether but challenges the premise of Dominion's claim that the "polar vortex" justifies the ACP.
- FERC announces plans to prepare an environmental impact statement and opens a scoping process to request comments on environmental issues. The process too closely follows Dominion's plans to survey an alternative route, critics charge.

March 2015

- Highlanders for Responsible Development calls on the FERC to broaden its scoping meetings to include Highland County.

- Highland's Economic Development Authority learns a pipeline gas tap would cost \$500,000 if built along with the rest of the project, but that cost would triple if built afterward. Dominion tells localities that instead of using taxpayer money to finance a tap, they could set aside tax revenue from Dominion instead. A step-down station costing an additional \$2 million would be financed by a distributor, which Highland does not have.
- The U.S. Forest Service issues a temporary special use permit to survey a 12.6-mile segment of the George Washington National Forest in Highland and Augusta counties.
- Dominion and its partners step up efforts to block delays. Companies say they are flatly against requests for federal regulators to extend the environmental scoping process.

April 2015

- Citizens in the path of the proposed pipeline join opponents from across Virginia and deliver more than 5,000 messages demanding Gov. Terry McAuliffe rescind his support for the project.
- U.S. Sen. Tim Kaine follows Sen. Mark Warner in taking FERC to task with concerns over frustration about scoping meetings in Nelson and Augusta counties. In an April 7 letter, Kaine says, "A number of Virginians who attended these meetings felt that this opportunity was not sufficiently given, due to a lack of clarity over precisely when citizens were able to sign up to offer verbal comment."
- A University of Virginia faculty member argues to FERC, that it's obvious the pipeline and header projects would be tied to other companies' pipelines, constituting a network linked to Dominion's newly approved Cove Point, Md., export facility. Dominion denies gas from the proposed pipeline would be sold overseas.
- Highland County officials tell FERC about protecting residents and businesses and demand Dominion pay to prove how it would avoid harming Highland; deny Dominion's request for exemption from the 500-foot open trench law; require Dominion provide its own worker housing and emergency responders; and order Dominion to help upgrade communications facilities.
- FERC tells Dominion it must provide answers to numerous issues before moving forward. Drinking water, karst topography, landslides, alternatives, emergencies, and public accountability are central to the broad federal inquiry.
- Highland residents speak out in final hours and days of FERC's scoping period. All are opposed to the ACP, and call for protecting drinking water and other natural resources.

May 2015

- Dominion dismisses town and county findings that construction would pollute municipal water in Monterey and McDowell.
- International environmental group asserts the way the government approves interstate pipelines is flawed. The contention reinforces project opponents' claims that comment and response timelines are unrealistic. The Natural Resources Defense Council urges FERC to revamp its review process.

- Dominion tells FERC that portions of the pipeline route in West Virginia and Virginia will cross areas known to contain karst features.
- FERC is asked to conduct a programmatic environmental review of pipeline proposals together and not separately. Dominion opposes the idea. In a blanket response, Dominion says the ACP and other gas pipeline projects are not “connected actions” within the meaning of the law.

June 2015

- High-ranking officials at Virginia’s Department of Environmental Quality apologize to the Virginia Cave Board for failing to inform them of their Fourth Amendment duties.
- Dominion responds as to why Highland supervisors are not mentioned as stakeholders in the environmental scoping. FERC said it doesn’t have to.
- Dominion’s public affairs and lobbying agency announces the launch of a pro-Atlantic Coast Pipeline group proclaiming urgency for building the pipeline and alleging a tripling of demand for natural gas over the next 20 years.
- Local public and environmental authorities point to myriad concerns over unsafe drinking water, dangerous erosion, and public safety threats, but Dominion cranks up its public relations and lobbying efforts to promote its plans.

Next week: The summary timeline continues, picking up the series of events from July 2015.