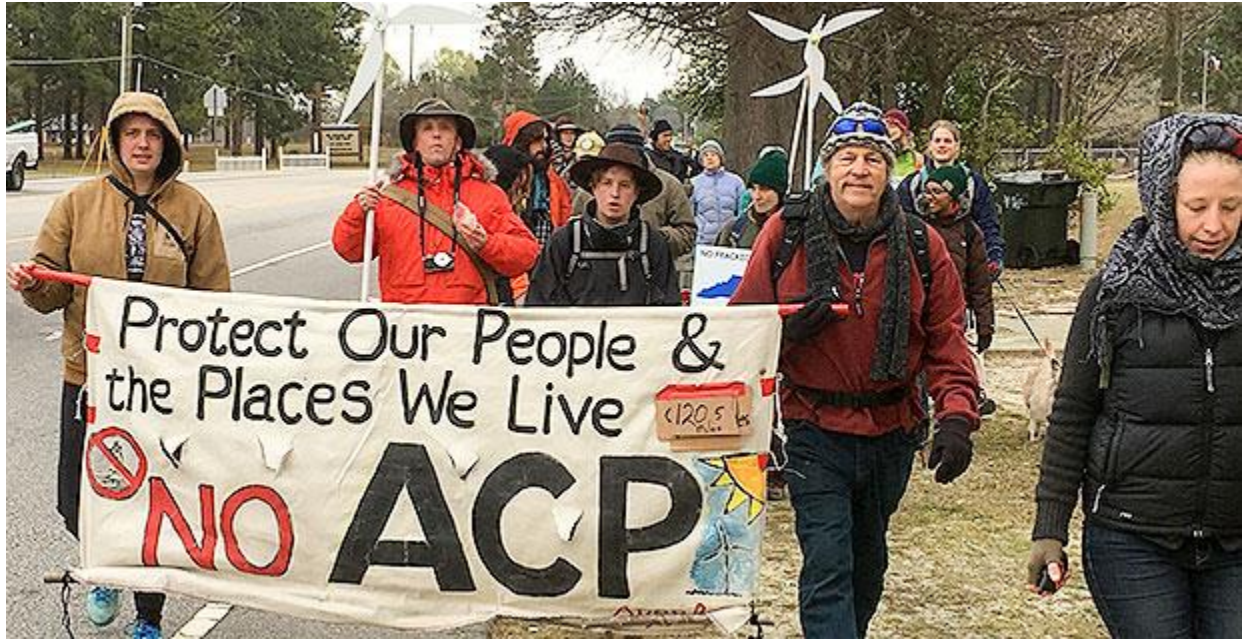


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FERC presses Atlantic Coast developer to answer critics

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Regulators have asked Dominion Energy Inc. to answer foes of the Atlantic Coast pipeline. Here, protesters march against the project in 2017. Mike Soraghan/E&E News

Federal regulators have asked the builders of the Atlantic Coast pipeline to answer project opponents' questions about the durability and potential toxicity of protective coating on the pipes.

Critics in the pipeline's path, along with environmental groups, have raised suspicions that anti-corrosion coating on the steel could have deteriorated from exposure to sunlight during months of storage, and that chemicals from the pipes could leach into groundwater.

If the concerns are true, degraded materials could leave the pipeline prone to corrosion and ruptures, potentially contaminating nearby communities' water supplies.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) last week passed on those questions to Dominion Energy Inc., the lead company on the pipeline. The agency wants answers within 20 days.

Bill Limpert, a staunch opponent of the pipeline who has been pressing the coating issue, welcomed FERC's request.

"Many questions remain, but maybe we'll get some answers," said Limpert, who owns property in the path of the pipeline in the Virginia mountains.

Dominion issued a statement Wednesday saying a third-party company has routinely checked the pipe coating.

"No issues have been identified," the statement said. "These inspections will continue throughout the project until its completion."

The statement did not address the question of whether the coating could contaminate groundwater.

The \$7 billion, 600-mile Atlantic Coast project is slated to run from West Virginia through Virginia and into North Carolina. It's backed by Dominion, Duke Energy Corp. and others.

The project has been on hold since the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals blocked its planned path under the Appalachian Trail in Virginia. Dominion has appealed to the Supreme Court.

Corrosion is a significant safety worry for pipeline operators. But damage to coating from sunlight has not been a widely acknowledged concern. Operators use low-voltage electrical current to prevent corrosion, including spots where the protective coating gets damaged. Inspectors also check the coating before pipe goes into the ground.

Limpert said that in 2017, an official from the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration told him that leaving pipes exposed to sunlight for two years would constitute an unacceptable safety risk. The pipes staged along the Atlantic Coast line were built between two and three years ago, with manufacturing completed by fall 2017.

Limpert has said he also suspects chemicals from the fusion-bonded epoxy coating can get into groundwater. The Natural Resources Defense Council has expressed similar concerns, saying coated pipe for a neighboring project, the Mountain Valley pipeline, has been spotted in trenches with what appears to be groundwater.

FERC told Dominion in its [letter](#) Wednesday that the agency needs toxicology and durability information about the coating to respond to the Virginia Department of Health. Virginia officials sent FERC a [letter](#) in March flagging the concerns, saying people in the state had raised questions. The Virginia officials said their research hadn't found specific environmental or health threats, but did discover that sunlight can degrade epoxy resins, producing benzene and other chemicals.