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Troubled 600-mile pipeline's need under scrutiny again

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MONTEREY — If it's not for power stations, then what?

A motion the Virginia State Corporation Commission approved last week again suggested a lack of need for – and unsound rationale behind — the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline.

An Associated Press article spotlighted the issue, focusing on the pipeline need controversy and quoting a source describing it as an albatross.

According to the SCC filing, construction of more gas power plants, the reason Dominion Energy cited for the pipeline in the first place, is no longer feasible in light of passage of renewable energy legislation.

Dominion is required to file an integrated resource plan by May 1. The SCC directed the company to include information about the legislation.

In a motion filed March 24, Dominion identified requirements as no longer relevant to resource planning. The first was not to take into account the Clean Power Plan passed under the Obama administration and was repealed in 2017.

In support of being relieved of other requirements, Dominion stated it has suspended development of North Anna 3, and coal without carbon sequestration technology is no longer a generating option.

Thirdly, and most telling, the company stated "significant build-out of natural gas generating facilities is currently not viable, with the passage by the General Assembly of the Virginia Clean Economy Act of 2020."

The filing did not mention the pipeline or say what the gas from the 600-mile, $8.5 billion project would be used for.

Dominion went on to say that removing a requirement related to comprehensive risk analysis would relieve the company of a time and resource intensive analysis that is no longer relevant. The investor owned utility stated it would conform with the VCEA with respect to solar power purchase agreements.

Dominion suspended construction after 6 percent completion in December 2018 because the U.S. Fourth District Court of Appeals vacated the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biological opinion and taking statement for the project.

The biological opinion has been vacated twice.

Other permits for the pipeline have either been invalidated by court decisions or are being challenged.

The U.S. Supreme Court is expected to rule on an appeal this summer to decide if the pipeline can cross under the Appalachian Trail on public land.

Dominion sells wholesale electricity through purchased-power agreements to Old Dominion Electric Cooperative, which is owned by BARC and Shenandoah Valley Electric Cooperatives, plus nine other member-owned electric coops in Virginia, Maryland and Delaware.

Highland County, served by both BARC and SVEC, would be the gateway for the pipeline from West Virginia to Virginia. Northern Bath County, served by BARC, would bridge the route into western Augusta County and then through Virginia to North Carolina's border with South Carolina.

Concerns over skyrocketing costs, overseas gas sales, water quality degradation, karst and species protection, mountaintop razing and eminent domain have driven a massive organized resistance filing lawsuits since the project was proposed in May 2014.

The company has unwaveringly glamorized the proposal, saying it is essential to the economy. While not on the current federal licensing, Dominion also conceded South Carolina and points south are among targeted gas service territories for connection to the pipeline.

Spokesman Aaron Ruby said the company has long had a presence in the Palmetto State. Dominion has acquired the state's largest gas transmission system and now provides electric and gas distribution service to homes and businesses across a 22,000-square-mile service territory in central, southern and western South Carolina.