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SELC: Dominion plan anchored on pollution

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CHARLOTTESVILLE — Dominion Energy's newly released long-term integrated resource plan undermines a new clean energy law by laying out a strategy that remains fossil fuel-intensive for at least the next 25 years. The utility will produce 10 million tons of carbon pollution in 2045, at a time when the new law requires the utility to reach zero emissions.

That's the assessment of the Southern Environmental Law Center.

"It is clear we can expect nothing positive at the federal level in the fight against climate change, which only heightens the critical role states must now play," SELC senior attorney Will Cleveland said in a news release Monday. "This is a time for bold action, and we are disappointed that Dominion wants to keep one foot firmly rooted in fossil fuels, while publicly touting its commitment to renewable energy."

Dominion said in a news release a planned roughly tenfold rise in renewable energy is driven, in part, by Gov. Ralph Northam's executive order on climate change and the Virginia Clean Economy Act. The investor-owned utility told legislators it will hike ratepayers' bills 3 percent annually over the next decade to pay for renewable energy expansion. "Gas fired generation will continue to play a critical, low emission role in our system for decades to come," the release says. Fossil fuels, including coal, gas and oil, generate 40 percent of Dominion ratepayer power, according to a company website.

"Dominion is passing up the opportunity to show how a forward-thinking utility could lead in these uncertain times with plans to simultaneously reduce emissions and ratepayer costs," Cleveland said.

SELC contends Dominion's integrated resource plan fails to correct the utility's years-long, chronic underuse of cost saving energy efficiency. It fails to meet new Virginia law requiring zero fossil fuel generation by 2045. Instead Dominion's preferred plan relies on nearly 10,000 MW of fossil fuel generation that will emit tens of millions of tons of CO_2 for the next 25 years and more. The plan fails in transparency about the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline, omitting any mention of the $8 billion fossil fuel pipeline, SELC said.

With respect to the pipeline, in mid-April, Montana Chief U.S. District Judge Brian Morris ruled the Army Corps of Engineers violated a key permit allowing pipelines to cross water, according to news sources. The decision was the most recent blow to the Keystone XL crude pipeline project but might further delay other projects including the Atlantic Coast and Mountain Valley pipelines. “A lot of people were quite surprised by the judge’s decision,” Dominion CEO Tom Ferrell said in an earnings call on Monday. “I think you should expect to see a lot of amicus briefs being filed. I mean, what he talked about was all forms of utility infrastructure, not just on oil pipeline in Montana, it was every single utility infrastructure program in the country. So it seems like maybe a strong action by the judge, maybe not completely justified by the case put forward,” Farrell said.

Dominion is monitoring any impacts and expects the Atlantic Coast Pipeline to begin service in 2022, following a favorable U.S. Supreme Court ruling to cross the Appalachian Trail, issuing of a biological opinion and the felling of hundreds of miles of trees next winter, Ferrell said. on Monday. “So that’s the real key for us is getting into that tree cutting season,” Farrell said.

It was uncertain if a Department of Justice and Army Corps motion to curb the ruling would succeed.