

Feds find safety problems at W.Va pipeline project

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Pieces of the Mountain Valley pipeline awaiting installation in Newport, Va. Pamela King/E&E News

Federal pipeline regulators say they found unsafe construction practices at a Mountain Valley pipeline (MVP) worksite in West Virginia last summer.

The **warning letter** from the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) said crews failed to build the line to specifications and placed pipe in ditches in a way that could damage it.

Construction on the \$5.5 billion, 300-mile gas pipeline is on hold because of legal challenges. PHMSA's enforcement action, posted late Monday, comes on top of recent problems with land slippage in the pipeline path and a threat to a key federal wetlands permit ([*Energywire*](#), April 22).

Developer Equitrans Midstream Corp. disputes the accusation that its construction practices violated project specifications and says it is preparing a response to PHMSA.

"The MVP project team has followed, and will continue to follow, the project's design and construction standards," said Equitrans spokeswoman Natalie Cox. "As construction resumes, Mountain Valley will continue to work with the administration to meet the highest standards of safety for the pipeline, which is our No. 1 priority."

PHMSA's report indicates crews might have been rushing, said Richard Kuprewicz, a chemical engineer who worked for years in the industry and now consults on pipeline safety.

"This could signal problems in future operations," he said, adding that there's a "possible disconnect between construction folks" and the people who will be operating the line.

MVP critics say the PHMSA letter is another example of the pipeline builders not living up to their promises on environment and safety.

"We're not just talking about mud in a stream," said Angie Rosser, executive director of the West Virginia Rivers Coalition. "These are our fears — that things are going to explode and people could lose their lives."

The inspection was done in August, a few days before work was voluntarily stopped on some sections of the 300-mile pipeline because of endangered species concerns ([*Energywire*](#), Aug. 16, 2019).

An inspector found pipe set in "rock-laden" trenches at two sites without adequate support, according to the PHMSA notice, which also said the trenches were too narrow. Protruding rocks could damage the protective coating that wards off corrosion. The inspector found that the pipe might be susceptible to stresses or damage likely to occur during the life of the pipe.

The PHMSA notice said the problem at one of the sites was subsequently fixed and proof was sent to the inspector. It did not say what happened with the problems at the other site, but the agency ordered that any of the listed problems be fixed.

The inspection took place in Braxton and Webster counties in West Virginia, about 80 miles east of Charleston, according to the warning letter sent April 14 to Equitrans' vice president for midstream operations, Gregg West.

The agency decided against seeking a fine.

PHMSA hit the Atlantic Coast pipeline with a similar enforcement action last summer, saying an inspector found pipes laid in rock-laden trenches in West Virginia. Atlantic Coast developer Dominion Energy Inc. disputed the accusation, saying the agency visited the site at a time when a court had suspended all construction activities and before construction was finished ([*Energywire*](#), Aug. 15, 2019).

The MVP project, designed to transport Marcellus Shale gas from northern West Virginia to southern Virginia, has run into numerous problems with heavy rains, erosion and environmental permitting. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission halted construction in October 2019 because of legal problems. The project website says construction on the pipeline is 90% complete and says it is expected to begin operations by the end of the year.