

CHARLESTON GAZETTE-MAIL
February 18, 2021

Mountain Valley Pipeline still facing concerns over Lewis County erosion issues

By Mike Tony Staff writer



Pictured is what Mountain Valley Watch identified as a problem area south of Copley Road in Lewis County along the Mountain Valley Pipeline right-of-way.

Fines and concerns over lack of erosion controls have long dogged the Mountain Valley Pipeline project, and an analysis filed by an opponent of the pipeline with federal regulators Tuesday argued that an increased risk of landslips along the project route in Lewis County remains despite efforts to stabilize slide areas.

The filing submitted to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission by Kirk Bowers, co-founder of the anti-pipeline group Mountain Valley Watch, cites topographic and rainfall studies, past filings with federal regulators and aerial photographs of the pipeline to make a case that highly erodible soils, above average annual precipitation rates, and steep mountain slopes have produced an ideal situation for landslides to occur.

“I really think it’s a dangerous situation that could end up in an eruption of the pipeline eventually,” Bowers, a retired civil engineer, said in an interview Wednesday.

Bowers’s analysis focuses on an area south of Brush Run Road in Lewis County where Mountain Valley Pipeline LLC has reported multiple slips since 2019 and aerial photographs from December showed what Bowers says was inadequate stabilization of the pipeline where it had shifted last year.

“They’re trying to stabilize it, but I’m not sure it’s going to work in that area,” Bowers said.

“It’s time that MVP acknowledged it has met its match,” Nancy Bouldin, a volunteer with the Indian Creek Watershed Association, wrote in an email Wednesday. “West Virginia’s mountains and mud are no place for a 42-inch pipeline. It’s not safe for the pipeline, for the environment or for the people who live anywhere near it.”

But Natalie Cox, spokeswoman for Equitrans Midstream Corporation, the Canonsburg, Pennsylvania-based developer of the still unfinished 303-mile pipeline, says that the pipeline was excavated, inspected, and replaced in the Lewis County area in question last year, with the hillside further reinforced using a mechanically engineered geotechnical reinforcement method to prevent any future soil movement.

Pipeline crews surveyed and inspected pipe in other locations along the route to confirm that this was an isolated incident, Cox said, adding that that was the case.

“The best method of environmental protection is restoration of the right-of-way, which will be done once construction is complete, and MVP will continue with its inspection processes throughout construction and in-service operations of the pipeline,” Cox wrote in an email Wednesday.

Bowers, though, points to a history of erosion in Lewis County that he chronicled through past environmental compliance monitoring reports that Mountain Valley filed with federal regulators, including a shift of installed pipe due to movement of slips in at least three locations south of Brush Run Road last winter to observe that the soil across West Virginia’s mountainous terrain will continue to be erodible and a poor environment for a pipeline.

“I don’t think they paid attention to soil types as much as they should have,” Bowers said.

The Mountain Valley Pipeline has faced several fines for erosion and sedimentation problems. The West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection recently proposed a consent order that would require Mountain Valley Pipeline LLC to pay \$303,000 for violating permits by failing to control erosion and sediment-laden water.

The state also fined Mountain Valley \$266,000 in 2019 for similar erosion and water contamination issues, and the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality fined Mountain Valley \$2.15 million that same year for water quality violations.

Jacob Hileman, an environmental hydrologist from southwest Virginia who has opposed the pipeline, filed an analysis with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission in September concluding that the Mountain Valley Pipeline crossed 203.4 miles of areas at high risk for landslides, two-thirds of the pipeline’s total length and more than any other large gas pipeline approved by the commission since 1997.

There is a recent history of explosions following landslides in West Virginia.

Columbia Gas Transmission told federal regulators that a landslide was the apparent cause of an explosion of the Leach Xpress pipeline near Moundsville in 2018, and in 2019, a pipeline ruptured near Lumberport, caused by a landslide about 150 yards from the rupture moving the pipeline 10 feet from its original location and putting too much stress on the pipe.

Mountain Valley has defended the pipeline's environmental impact, saying it identifies instances of noncompliance observed by environmental inspectors and addresses them.

The Mountain Valley Pipeline is a multibillion-dollar project that has ballooned by billions of dollars. Repeated legal and regulatory challenges have set Mountain Valley's targeted in-service date back three years to the end of 2021 and helped raise its price tag to at least \$5.8 billion, over 50% more than its original cost estimate.

Mike Tony at mtony@wvgazette.com, 304-348-1236 or follow @Mike__Tony on Twitter.