

Mountain Valley Pipeline delayed again as project cost keeps rising

By Mike Tony Staff writer

The projected in-service date for the Mountain Valley Pipeline has been pushed back yet again.

Equitrans Midstream Corp. announced Tuesday it was moving its targeted in-service date for the pipeline from the end of 2021 to the summer of 2022, a delay the company predicted would add at least \$200 million to the now \$6.2 billion project.

The delay factors in more time that the primary developer of the pipeline slated to travel from Northwestern West Virginia to Southern Virginia says it will need to get water crossing permits for the project, which was originally scheduled for completion by the end of 2018 at a cost of just \$3.5 billion.

Diana Charletta, Equitrans Midstream president and chief operating officer, noted during the company's first-quarter earnings call Tuesday that Mountain Valley Pipeline LLC, the joint venture that owns the pipeline, still has applications pending with West Virginia and Virginia state environmental regulators for about 300 water crossings while it seeks approval from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to tunnel under 120 additional waterbodies.

The West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection last month asked for an additional 90 days beyond the 120 days the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers gave the agency to review Mountain Valley Pipeline LLC's water permit request.

But the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality in March requested an additional year to review the pipeline permit application.

“Based on the complexity of this project and past public controversy, we cannot reasonably issue the [water] permit before December 2021 and we believe it is quite likely that we could not issue this permit until early 2022,” Melanie Davenport of the department’s water permitting division wrote to the Corps in March.

West Virginia and Virginia state environmental regulators are still awaiting responses from the Corps, their spokespeople said Tuesday.

Charletta said Equitrans Midstream’s targeted summer 2022 in-service date is based on receiving all water crossing approvals and the lifting of a remaining exclusion zone around Jefferson National Forest by the end of 2021.

First announced in 2014, the 42-inch-diameter, 303-mile Mountain Valley Pipeline is slated to provide up to 2 billion cubic feet per day of natural gas from the Marcellus and Utica shale formations to markets in the Mid-Atlantic and Southeastern regions of the United States, traveling from Northwestern West Virginia to Southern Virginia.

Tuesday’s announcement from Equitrans Midstream comes less than a week after the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality reissued a denial of a water quality permit for the planned Southgate extension of the project.

Charlie Burd, executive director of the Gas and Oil Association of West Virginia, called the latest Mountain Valley Pipeline delay disappointing for royalty owners and counties that would benefit from tax revenue generated by the pipeline.

“[It’s] income in every direction you look,” Burd said. “It produces income to businesses large and small.”

But environmentalists hailed the delay, viewing it as another setback for a project that they have helped stall through legal challenges, including one that prompted Mountain Valley Pipeline LLC to abandon a blanket water permit issued by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and seek individual water permits.

“When are they going to realize it’s time to scrap it altogether?” asked Karan Ireland, Central Appalachia senior campaign representative for the Sierra Club.

The West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection [announced](#) a \$303,000 fine for Mountain Valley Pipeline LLC in February for violating permits by failing to control erosion and sediment-laden water. The state also [fined](#) Mountain Valley Pipeline \$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.

“Their track record in construction has not been all that stellar. We have seen water quality impacts just from the upland construction,” West Virginia Rivers Coalition Executive Director Angie Rosser said. “That’s all the more reason we need to be scrutinizing these stream crossings.”