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## New surveys, scoping called coincidence

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**BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER**

MONTEREY — An environmental scoping process too closely followed Dominion’s plans to survey an alternative route for the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline, critics charge.

Landowners received survey letters no more than 10 working days before the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission announced a “notice of intent” Feb. 27 in preparation of an environmental impact statement. A comment period then opened, and scoping meetings were announced about the proposed 42-inch interstate natural gas transmission pipeline that could cross Highland.

As of Monday, the agency had not responded to a raft of requests for delay and extension of the scoping process that ends April 28.

Sierra Club Virginia Chapter asked FERC to delay the process for 30 days, to lengthen it from 60 to 90 days and to add Highland and other locales to its meeting schedule.

According to Kirk Bowers, chair of the chapter’s pipeline committee, the limited time period between Dominion’s announcement of alternative routes and the commencement of FERC scoping does not allow adequate time for residents to obtain necessary information and give adequate consideration to the new alternatives.

The new alternatives adversely impact cultural and historical landmarks, environmentally sensitive areas and nationally recognized birding and natural areas upon which the environmental impact requires careful review, Bowers said in comments to FERC.

“Meetings were not scheduled in Highland, Buckingham, Cumberland, Nottoway, Brunswick, Sussex, Southampton and Greensville counties. These are large areas with hundreds of property owners affected. The number of scoping meetings is inadequate to cover the large areas affected (and) additional meetings are required,” he said.

Dominion announced the new route after FERC staff reserved the meeting places, a FERC spokeswoman told The Recorder.

A Dominion spokesman said the alternative route has been a matter of public record for more than two months, but the survey mailings went out in mid-February because Monongahela National Forest had not issued a survey permit.

The nearest scoping meetings to Highland will be more than a month after the latest survey letters were mailed. They will be at 7 p.m. March 19 in Stuarts Draft High School, 1028 Augusta Farms Road, Stuarts Draft and 7 p.m. March 23 in Elkins High School, 100 Kennedy Drive, Elkins, W.Va. Both schools are more than 50 miles from Monterey but are the closest of the 10 meeting venues to Highland.

The regulatory agency's spokeswoman said FERC staff worked for months to arrange the meeting places, that Dominion's recent announcement of alternative routes was a coincidence, that this comment period is twice as long as usual and that comments will be accepted even after the comment period closes.

"The timing of FERC staff's issuance of its notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement for the planned Atlantic Coast Pipeline Project is coincidental to the filing of new information from Dominion Pipeline identifying alternative routes," Tamara Young-Allen of FERC media relations said.

"FERC staff worked several months in advance to arrange for the venues to host our scoping meetings — 10 for this project and Dominion Supply Header Project in North Carolina, West Virginia as well as Virginia," Young-Allen said. "Our staff strives to book venues along a planned pipeline's route that can accommodate at least 400 people, has adequate parking, restroom facilities and security.

"Only after the venues had been booked did Dominion notify FERC staff of potential alternatives to its original route. However, FERC staff was able to include the addresses of the new landowners, provided by Dominion based on tax records, who may be impacted by this alternative, in its mailing of the NOI, issued on Feb. 27. The scoping meetings for the newly-identified communities are scheduled to take place Wednesday, March 18 and Thursday, March 19, 2015," she said.

Young-Allen said that usually there is a 30-day comment period, but "because of the scope of the planned project in this case, FERC staff is providing a 60-day comment period, ending April 28. Unlike many other federal agencies, FERC staff will even consider comments that are filed after the deadline."

FERC staff arranged the meeting venues to cover the areas that may be impacted by the pipeline proposal and sent the announcement to newly identified landowners who may be impacted by the alternative route, Young-Allen said.

“If they feel they don’t have enough time to study the alternative routes by the time the scoping meetings take place, members of the public may wish to submit their comments by the deadline, April 28, either electronically, if they have access to a computer and the Internet or by postal mail. All comments will be considered, no matter the method used,” she said.

She said when and if Dominion files its formal application, FERC staff will assign the case a new docket number. All comments submitted during the pre-filing phase will be preserved in the docket.

“There will be additional opportunities for public comments – on the proposed application and on the draft environmental impact statement that FERC staff will prepare. The timing of a company’s formal application filing with FERC is a decision that stands solely with the company. There is no statutory deadline and no obligation to file. However, I believe Dominion anticipates filing their formal application later this year,” Young-Allen said.

She stressed that FERC staff considers all comments, whether verbal at the scoping meetings, electronically using the eFiling or eComment options found at [www.ferc.gov](http://www.ferc.gov) under the “Documents and Filings” tab, filed via postal mail to FERC, Office of the Secretary, Washington, D.C. 20426 or filed after a stated deadline.

For its part, Dominion said it had no idea when FERC would announce its scoping process.

“We were awaiting the (FERC) announcement with its information about the scoping period and meetings just like everyone else,” Dominion spokesman Jim Norvelle said. “We did not know the dates of the scoping period or meetings until the (FERC announcement) was issued on Feb. 27.”

Dominion mailed letters Feb. 13 notifying Highland landowners about the surveys, and news media were notified Feb. 16.

“The information about this alternate route is not new,” Norvelle said. The route was discussed in a report filed with FERC in early December, he said. “So it has been public information for almost three months. What became known by Feb. 16 is that we were planning to survey the alternate route,” he said.

Norvelle said Dominion needs to survey the alternate route because it has not yet received permission to survey in the Monongahela National Forest and does not know what it may find there. “A suitable, alternate route such as this one that avoids much of the MNF may be needed for the ACP to cross from West Virginia into Virginia,” he said.

The alternative route would enter Highland County south of the originally proposed route near Hightown, about two miles north of the Route 84 state line and crossing George Washington National Forest.

The alternative would cross Route 84 in Mill Gap, U.S. 220 near Mustoe, and trace across upper Big Valley and the middle section of Bullpasture River Valley toward the same eastern egress

point as the original route, about two miles south of U.S. 250 on the west shoulder of Shenandoah Mountain, again across GWNF.

Separately, Kenda Hanuman, one of many alternative route landowners in Nelson requesting more time to comment, asked about an online FERC notice that was issued after a weather-related federal government office closing. The notice said comments would not be accepted until the office reopened.

FERC's Young-Allen said the closing only impacted those filings that were due on that specific date and that FERC began accepting filings the following day after a two-hour delay, around 10:30 a.m. FERC hours are from Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. and waived the deadline for filings due the date of closure only.