

Our view: The big picture on pipelines

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Let's start with a fact:

A Pittsburgh-based company wants to build a natural gas pipeline through this part of Virginia to connect the fracking fields of West Virginia with a bigger pipeline in Chatham — along with some compressor stations along the way that would be named after former Pittsburgh Steelers football players. We'd get the Swann station, named after Hall of Fame wide receiver Lynn Swann.

Now another fact:

The decision on whether to build this pipeline — through the national forest, under the Appalachian Trail, across the property of lots of private landowners — will be made by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which will do so on technical grounds. Basically, is there a market for this natural gas and, if so, is this an OK route for it?

Now here's a thought experiment: FERC says it analyzes each pipeline proposal separately. But how close would another proposed pipeline have to be before FERC analyzed them together and not separately? One mile? Five miles? Fifty miles? One hundred miles?

It's not a silly question (at least we don't think so). And here's why: There already is another pipeline that's been proposed that would appear to run pretty darned close to the route for the Mountain Valley Pipeline. That's the Appalachian Connector pipeline. The company behind it hasn't filed the formal paperwork yet, so we really don't know anything other than the general maps that have been released that show it starting in

the same West Virginia county where the MVP would start and then winding up in the same place — Chatham.

About 90 miles to the north is another proposed pipeline — the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, which wants to cut through Highland, Augusta, Albemarle and Nelson counties on its way east.

Some, especially opponents, look at all these and ask: Shouldn't FERC analyze all these pipelines together? Diana Christopulos of the Roanoke Cool Cities Coalition put it this way in a recent commentary piece on these pages: "If we compare it with the interstate highway system, it would be as if we allowed private turnpike companies to build large highways through our region with no entrance or exit ramps and no overall sense of which highways are most needed — with private companies taking property from local residents and businesses and reaping all the profit."

We'll put it this way: There's basically a land rush going on among energy companies to get natural gas from the newly exploited Marcellus Shale formation to market. Nothing wrong with that (well, unless you object to natural gas in the first place); the problem is these companies all are using the right of eminent domain to take land from property owners. What's wrong with a little coordination here? Is there really a market for all this natural gas and, if so, can't we run some of these lines side-by-side to get the same amount of gas to market but reduce the number of landowners affected?

The Atlantic Coast Pipeline would start just one county away in West Virginia from the MVP and the Appalachian — and head to Portsmouth. Why couldn't all three basically follow the same route to Chatham, at least? That's not what those who oppose the very idea of pipelines want to hear — they don't want one coming through, much less three in the same place — but it seems somebody ought to ask that kind of big-picture question.

It doesn't seem a question FERC wants to hear, either.

Why doesn't FERC do a regional analysis of all the pipelines? Here's what FERC's spokeswoman tells us:

“FERC staff will prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) for each project after a formal application is submitted. Each EIS will include an analysis of the cumulative impacts of all other existing or potential projects in the region, including infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges, etc.”

And just what is meant by “the region”? Are the MVP and the Atlantic Coast in the same region in FERC’s eyes?

“FERC’s definition of ‘region’ is the same as that found in any English dictionary.”

Merriam-Webster has nine different definitions for “region” but none spells out a specific proximity. So who knows?

There is one way to make sure the pipelines are somewhat coordinated — but environmentalists are suspicious of it. A Republican congressman from New Jersey — Tom MacArthur, aka “T-Mac,” not to be confused with the former NBA All-Star of the same name — has introduced a bill calling on the secretary of interior to designate 10 “energy corridors” on the East Coast where pipelines would be allowed to cut through federal lands, such as national forests.

He says this is needed to speed up pipeline construction — his interest is getting more natural gas to the Northeast, where his constituents currently pay more than other parts of the country. He says this wouldn’t preclude other environmental regulations on pipelines; it would just “streamline” the permitting process since they’d all be going through the same place.

There are already such “energy corridors” designated in the West; they just hadn’t been necessary in the East until companies started fracking the Marcellus Shale for natural gas.

Environmentalists look at a bill backed by the gas energy industry and instinctively shudder. Greg Buppert, senior attorney for the Charlottesville-based Southern Environmental Law Center, testified against the bill last month. The idea of energy

corridors isn't inherently bad, he said, but the process by which they'd be chosen would be. He says the bill would cut the public out of the planning process, and the requirement for 10 corridors is "arbitrary."

The way he sees it: Some official in Washington would pick 10 such corridors through the national forest — essentially routing 10 pipeline highways — and if your county is at the other end, oh well. Doesn't matter whether environmental studies are still required; the feds have already said there will be pipelines coming through, so there. A valid point.

Still, the question remains, whether you want to stop pipelines or build them: If we have three pipelines starting in about the same place and generally headed in the same direction, shouldn't somebody look at them all together?