

Marshall: Chickahominy Power plant is dead. Is the Mountain Valley Pipeline next?

By Alex Marshall

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The recent failure of the Chickahominy pipeline and power plant is a victory for climate and social justice activists across Virginia. This follows the cancellation of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and the C4GT power plant in Charles City County. So what's next? As Chickahominy shuts down, it's time to turn our attention to the Mountain Valley Pipeline. If activists maintain their momentum, and legislators continue to do the right thing, the MVP may not - and most definitely should not — be built.

With recent developments, the odds for the MVP are looking slimmer by the day. After years of review, the MVP still hasn't been able to obtain necessary environmental permits for all of its construction. Among other issues, the pipeline threatens endangered species and courts have now thrown out two permits from the Fish and Wildlife Service under the Endangered Species Act. The pipeline would cut through crucial habitats for the logperch and candy darter — two threatened species of fish that live along the pipeline route. The court warned the Fish and Wildlife Service that “if a species is already speeding toward the extinction cliff, an agency may not press on the gas.”

In addition to the Fish and Wildlife permit, the MVP has also failed to attain several other crucial permits, including the Army Corps' 404 permit under the Clean Water Act and an air-quality permit needed to build a compressor station near Chatham.

Chickahominy Pipeline and MVP share certain similarities. Both would create massive harm to Virginia communities, with few economic benefits. Both pipelines' proposed power stations would increase environmental inequalities in underprivileged communities. Chickahominy's power plant proposal targeted predominantly Black communities in Charles City County. Meanwhile, the compressor station MVP proposes for Chatham would also be placed in proximity to a community of color, where health inequalities already abound. Residents near existing compressor stations report severe headaches, throat irritation, body pain and mental fatigue at dramatically higher levels than communities further from the plants. Compressor stations release volatile organic carbons, fine particulates and pollutants like formaldehyde, all of which pose severe health hazards when inhaled. There is even the risk of exposure to radioactive gasses close to compressor stations.

Chickahominy and MVP are also similar in their economic impact on Virginia. In the end, these pipelines would do virtually nothing to build the Virginia economy and labor force. A similar pipeline, the Keystone XL Pipeline, which would have crossed more than 1,000 miles, would only generate 35 long-term jobs. That's far less than the average small business, despite the billions of dollars the pipeline could rake in for large corporations. Chickahominy and the MVP are nonviable for a clean future

in Virginia. They're bad for communities, and fiercely resisted by local citizens. And — perhaps most importantly for their demise — they are both financially absurd.

However, despite the similarities to Chickahominy, the MVP is especially unprecedented. Its proposed route crosses a total of 1,100 streams. It has already received an extraordinary 300+ clean water citations. It would also be built in extremely mountainous terrain — nearly one-quarter of the proposed pipeline will traverse slopes greater than 30%, about the equivalent of a black diamond ski slope. The MVP has already caused several dangerous landslides that forced evacuations and damaged property in Franklin County and in Wetzel, West Virginia. MVP has become notorious for crossing 224 miles of high-risk terrain — more than any other natural gas pipeline, perhaps ever.

With Chickahominy dead, we can look to the future with hope. Virginia needs clean energy to power our homes and economy. The MVP pipeline would provide the opposite. It would, quite literally, carve fossil fuels into the landscape of the Appalachians. The “jobs” created will not last much longer than the short-term construction contracts, but the injury to nature, the risks of poisoned waterways and pipe explosions, and the symbol of complicity in greenhouse gas emissions will be burned into the mountains for much time to come.