

The Recorder November 23, 2017

Pipeline route helps resident decide to move

BY JOHN BRUCE • STAFF WRITER

Pictured is Geoff Hamill's cabin on Route 84 in Pocahontas County, one mile from the Highland County line. The route of the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline is plotted about a mile north of the tiny community, in previous times known as Buzzardsville, which is surrounded by the Monongahela National Forest. (Recorder photo by Geoff Hamill) FROST, W.Va. — Native brown trout glide through bubbling streams on Geoff Hamill's rolling woodland property, less than a mile south of the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline's path.

Hamill joined The Recorder 15 months ago as Bath County community news editor. He chose his West Virginia home on Allegheny Mountain years earlier because of its central location between Monongahela and George Washington national forests.

He's convinced expanses of both national forests are destined to vanish in the interest of industrial land grabbers bent on exporting fracked gas, from Marcellus and Utica fields, to markets worldwide.

"Money controls the government," says Geoff Hamill. "All the environmental studies fall on deaf ears." (Recorder photo by John Bruce) By the end of the month, Hamill will leave behind his dream home, just across the Highland County line, and his many home improvement projects.

The proposed pipeline route made his choice easier.

"I tell people you can drive in any direction from here and find beautiful landscapes, and that's going to change," Hamill said. "Unless a miracle happens, this pipeline will be built. We have gutless politicians. Money controls the government. All the environmental studies fall on deaf ears."

Hamill had hard words for Virginia's executive branch: "Governor McAuliffe says, 'I can do whatever I want to do, no matter what the scientists say.'"

Hamill is upset about the pipeline route because it goes through national forests. "It's not a proper use of national forest land. You can have multi-use forest land, but after this pipeline, it's not going to be a forest anymore. It will be an ugly gash and dissect the forest for many species.

"People will tell you there are pipelines through national forests everywhere, but this is not a six or 12-inch pipeline. It's a 42-inch pipeline that will leave a huge scar. You're basically cutting a gash through the forest the size of an interstate highway."

Another factor troubling Hamill is the federal government has given Dominion the power of eminent domain. "They can take people's property rights. Mountaineers aren't free anymore."

ACP, Dominion's pipeline partnership with Duke Energy, Southern Company and others, resembles energy giant Kinder Morgan's Ruby Pipeline, suggested Hamill, a 13-year U.S. Army veteran officer who holds a University of Pittsburgh law degree. Both pipeline projects are 600 or more miles long, interstate in nature and 42 inches in diameter. But, more importantly, both projects were proposed on a promise they would avoid environmentally sensitive areas, and the gas would be transported for domestic use only, not for overseas export.

According to media sources, the Center for Biological Diversity and Summit Lake Paiute Tribe of Nevada petitioned the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals for emergency action to block Ruby. Despite losing the injunction, the court later ruled in their favor, finding that pipeline reviews of impacts on endangered species and habitats violate environmental law.

"Dominion is playing the same game as Ruby Pipeline," Hamill said, "because they said it was all for domestic. Lo and behold, after the (Ruby) pipeline was in the ground, the federal court of appeals said the environmental reviews weren't worth the paper they were written on."

Closer to the proposed ACP route, on Maryland's western shore, Dominion's Cove Point export facility is connected to three major interstate pipelines that, in turn, are interconnected with the country's natural gas transmission system, "so the natural gas could come from virtually anywhere in the United States," a project statement explains.

The terminal is expected to enter commercial service this month.

Of ACP, Hamill said, "Dominion saying it's all for domestic use is a sham. That's what was done for Ruby. After a couple of years, now they're coming back to the federal government and asking to export." He believes Dominion will build additional export terminals in Hampton Roads and Charleston, S.C.

Hamill wanted to make it clear his decision was not solely a result of the proposed pipeline, but it was a deciding factor. "I'm leaving, but not just because of the pipeline. The people at The Recorder have been wonderful. When I worked at other places, I saw The Recorder and said it was a great newspaper."

He will join The Madisonian, a weekly newspaper serving and named after Madison County in southwest Montana. "I'm getting a wonderful opportunity," Hamill said. He joins as newspaper editor in Ennis, Mont.

"My decision came easier because of the pipeline," Hamill said. "You're going to hear construction activity from here (less than a mile north). The little valley (east of Allegheny Mountain on Route 84) will be destroyed. That makes my decision to leave West Virginia easier. Up here, I've lived and loved for many years.

"The copperheads will come down into people's yards" as a result of construction, he added. "I've never seen a copperhead in mine. It's going to affect wildlife."

Don't ask Hamill if he'll accept offers for his home. He has lined up prospective renters.

Dominion first proposed the pipeline, originally dubbed the Southeast Reliability Project, more than three years ago, starting out as a \$4 billion, 550-mile undertaking. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission conditionally licensed the project last month after the Virginia Outdoors Foundation approved a land swap. The controversial deal allowed Dominion to cut through conservation easements in Bath, Highland and Nelson counties, in clearing one of the latest project delays.

The original pipeline cost estimate grew by 27.5 percent — to \$5.1 billion — since early 2014. The distance lengthened 9 percent, to 600 miles, on a circuitous path crossing environmentally sensitive, mountainous terrain and generating public protest against eminent domain, mountaintop removal, and water pollution.

Dominion expects to secure water quality control board approvals from North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia before beginning construction by the end of this year.