

Cow Knob Salamander

Potential Impact of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline

The Cow Knob Salamander (*Plethodon punctatus*) is a woodland salamander found primarily on Shenandoah Mountain in Virginia and West Virginia at elevations ranging from 2000 to over 4400 feet. This species is terrestrial and lives under rocks, logs, and other surface debris, where it is moist and cool. It is threatened by logging, roadbuilding, forest fragmentation, and deforestation.

Nearly the entire range of the Cow Knob Salamander lies within the George Washington National Forest (GWNF). These endemic salamanders are a source of regional pride and are a part of some of the most amazing biodiversity found anywhere.

Because the Cow Knob Salamander is at high risk for extinction or extirpation, it has been:

- Proposed by the Commonwealth of Virginia as a Tier I species with Critical Conservation Need
- Proposed by the state of West Virginia as a Priority I Species of Greatest Conservation Need
- Nominated for listing under the Endangered Species Act

The proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline passes through Cow Knob Salamander habitat as it crosses Shenandoah Mountain south of Rt. 250. Its presence was confirmed when ACP field surveys conducted in 2015 found numerous Cow Knob Salamanders along the proposed right-of-way. Occurrences of the Cow Knob Salamander have also been documented south of Rt. 250 by Dr. Reid Harris, Professor of Biology at James Madison University, in 2008.

In 1994, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the GWNF entered into a Conservation Agreement to keep this at-risk species from needing to be listed under the Endangered Species Act. This Conservation Agreement established the Shenandoah Mountain Crest Conservation Area with written guidelines that protect habitat for

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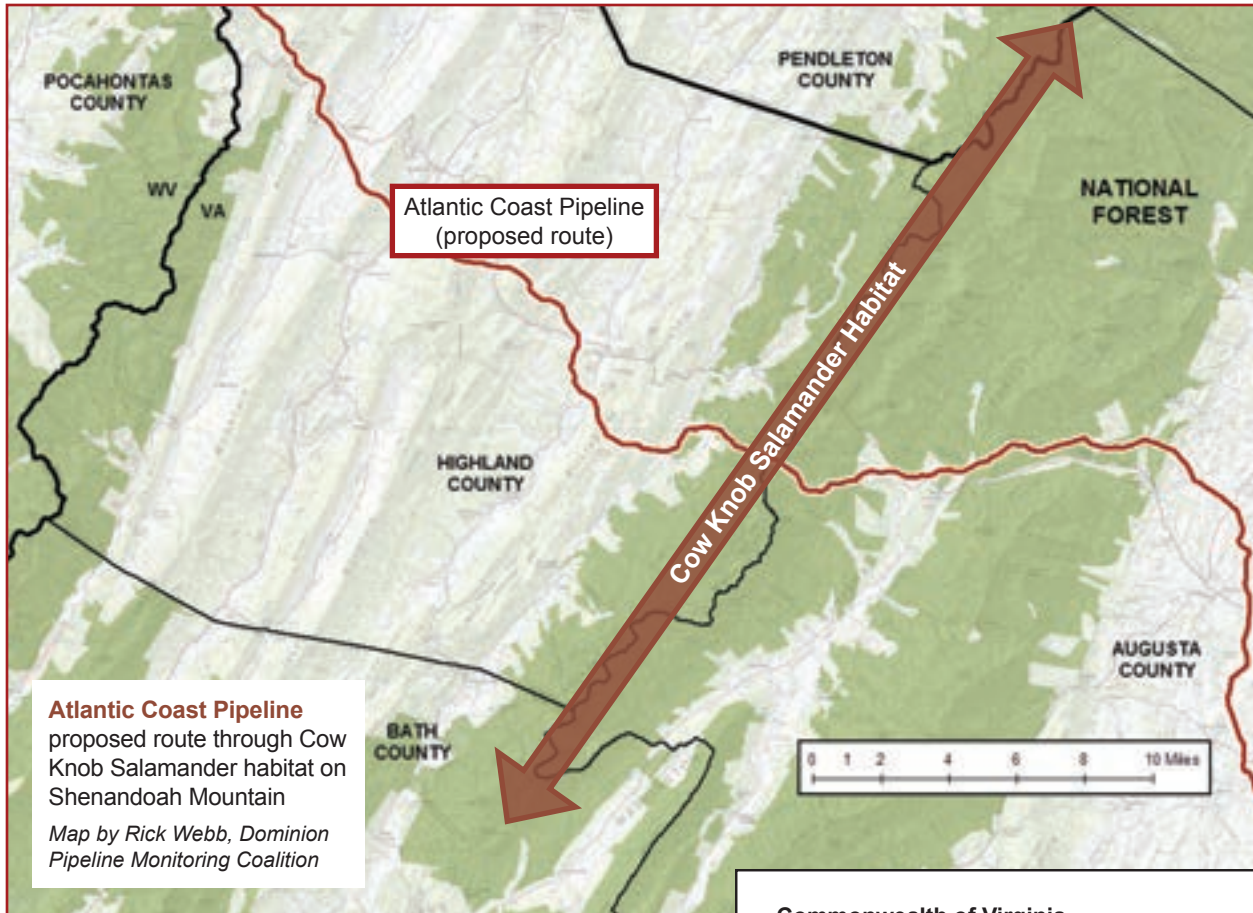
Cow Knob Salamander (above right) and Cow Knob Salamander habitat on Shenandoah Mountain in the vicinity of the proposed pipeline route (right).



Steven David Johnson



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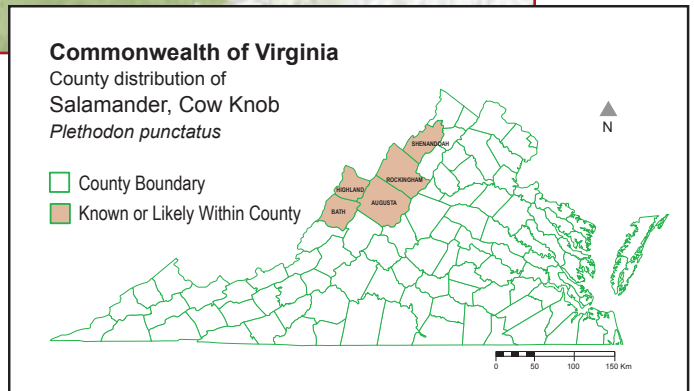


the Cow Knob Salamander within the boundaries of the Conservation Area and anywhere else Cow Knob Salamanders are found. The agreement also set up a Conservation Team, composed of representatives from federal and state agencies, and charged them with reviewing potential management activities that may affect the Cow Knob Salamander or its habitat.

According to a letter from GWNF Supervisor Tom Speaks to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, dated Sept. 17, 2015:

- The Conservation Team met and determined that the ACP Project is not in compliance with the Conservation Agreement.
- Adverse effects of the project on the Cow Knob Salamander must be avoided; they cannot be mitigated.
- The GWNF plan states that Cow Knob Salamander habitat is unsuitable for new utility corridors or roads.
- ACP should develop an alternate route that avoids Cow Knob Salamander habitat.

If built, the Atlantic Coast Pipeline would bisect an area with known populations of Cow Knob Salamander, creating an uncrossable barrier that would isolate populations and cut off genetic exchange. Habitat fragmentation and deforestation from construction and maintenance of a permanent pipeline corridor would further endanger this sensitive species, found nowhere else on earth. ■



Cow Knob Salamander.

Billy Flint