

Insist that Virginia protect its water

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NANCY SORRELLS

Water is the driving force behind our region's quality of life. Here we are blessed with safe and pure drinking water for our homes, schools, businesses, and farms. Our economic engine is fueled with water!

And that water doesn't stay in western Virginia. We are the headwaters. What starts in that maze of cracks, caves, and conduits underneath our feet flows to the surface and makes its way to the nation's capital and Virginia's capital. Eventually it flows into the Chesapeake Bay.

A powerful resource our water is. But, oh, such a fragile resource, one easily ruined, diverted, and contaminated. Those of us who live here know how easily contaminants can spread for miles from a small sinkhole, poor erosion and sediment control, or something as simple as highway work. This water is threatened by Dominion's proposed pipeline. I am asking for your support in helping safeguard our water from the impacts of this destructive pipeline.

We have had to watch with hands tied as most of the decisions surrounding the Atlantic Coast Pipeline have been taking place with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. This quasi-federal agency has long had a tendency to rubber stamp proposals like the ACP regardless of whether or not there is a need for the natural gas and despite a litany of documented negative impacts.

Now, for the first time in this prolonged process, Virginia, not FERC, has power and authority. The line in the sand, so to speak, lies with our water. Congress was very explicit in 1972 when it passed the Clean Water Act – states were given the authority to protect water quality within their borders. Under this act, Virginia then mandated to the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality and the State Water Control Board the job of protecting the quality of Virginia's waters.

Because of the Clean Water Act, Virginia has the power to grant or deny the water quality permits associated with pipeline construction. These are the permits that would decide if and how Dominion could cross streams and wetlands and impact above ground and below ground waters in the state. In Augusta County alone that translates to 189 stream and 43 wetland crossings as well as groundwater recharge areas for public and private drinking water. DEQ is supposed to conduct in-depth reviews of water issues along the routes and make recommendations to the SWCB about whether to grant or deny permits or place certain restrictions on the construction.

Sadly, the DEQ seems to be operating on Dominion's rushed schedule. This means that they are proposing to shortcut critical components of the review and deferring back to the federal government the authority to review all river and stream crossings. Virginians need to be in control of our own water. We should not lower our standards and bow to a private company's timetable or stock portfolio. When the Augusta County Service Authority needs to run a water or sewer pipeline to schools for instance, they have to fill out lengthy documents in excruciating detail describing the specific unique nature of EVERY stream crossing, including information about threatened and endangered species, historic resources, and water withdrawal uses.

DEQ will be holding a series of public hearings about this water issue beginning Monday, Aug. 7. Plan to attend one or all of the hearings and give your three-minutes' worth. We must tell DEQ and the SWCB that we expect them to uphold their mission of protecting Virginia's waters and the people, plants, animals, and habitats that use those waters. Bring a container of your favorite water and explain how you use that water (drinking, watering your garden, farming, manufacturing, fishing, swimming, etc.). Bring pictures of your water or watershed that is threatened by the ACP.

Ask DEQ to not abdicate its responsibility to Virginia's water. Insist upon a comprehensive review of stream and wetlands crossings. Insist that Dominion do what everyone else in the state of Virginia has to do to ensure that Virginians from the mountains to the Chesapeake Bay have clean water. The risks involved in this unprecedented type of construction have raised grave concerns about the ability for any company to safely construct such a pipeline. Gambling with that precious water just can't be an option. The stakes are too high.

ACP public hearing schedule

- Aug. 7, 6-10 p.m. James Madison University, Festival Conference & Student Center - Grand Ballroom, 1301 Carrier Drive, Harrisonburg, VA 22807

- Aug. 10, 6-10 p.m. Longwood University, Jarman Auditorium, 201 High Street, Farmville, VA 23901

- Aug. 14, 6-10 p.m. Southside Virginia Community College Alberta gymnasium at 109 Campus Drive in Alberta, VA