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Whitescarver: Governor Northam, these pipelines aren't being done 'right'

Robert N. Whitescarver Whitescarver is a farmer and retired soil conservationist with USDA. He lives in Augusta County. Contact him at bobby.whitescarver@gettingmoreontheground.com.

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By Robert N. Whitescarver

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"If we are going to this, we are going to do it right," Dr. Ralph Northam said on the campaign trail to become governor of Virginia, referring to the Mountain Valley Pipeline (MVP) and Atlantic Coast Pipeline (ACP), two, 42-inch diameter gas pipelines planned to be built across Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains.

Gov. Northam, it's not being done right, and without the right steps forward from your administration, Virginia's water resources and everyone in the path of these projects will remain at risk.

I hear from the opposite side that these pipelines have been through the most rigorous environmental review process in history. If this is true then we have a flawed system. Various permits have been revoked by the courts, there are more lawsuits than I can count, landslides and soil-covered roads, yards, and driveways, repeated Notices of Violations and the Virginia DEQ has shut down the MVP because the state's Erosion and Sediment Control standards are not adequate to handle the siltation from a project of this magnitude.

The pipeline builders, EQT and Dominion, are not "doing it right."

I hear from the opposite side that these pipelines are safe. I'm not convinced.

There was an explosion of a newly constructed 32-inch pipeline last month in West Virginia that incinerated 11 acres of land. In 2010 the San Bruno natural gas pipeline destroyed 37 homes and killed eight people. In 2008 a natural gas pipeline explosion in Appomattox destroyed two homes.

There were 297 significant incidents from pipeline accidents in 2017 according to the U.S. Department of Transportation's Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration. They define significant incident as any fatality or damage exceeding \$50,000. There were eight fatalities and damages exceeding \$200 million in 2017.

Just because EQT and Dominion keep saying pipelines are safe does not make me believe it.

I've taken their other taking point, that having a pipeline under your property will not lower its value, with a grain of salt as well.

I see the news reports, I see the pictures of soil erosion, I hear the voices of the people affected and run over by profiteering corporations. VDOT closed Cahas Mountain Road in Franklin County because of mudslides caused by construction of the MVP.

MVP contractors were not supposed to cut trees after the beginning of the nesting season for migratory birds, yet they kept felling the trees, bird nests and all.

The ACP has conditional 401 certification from the Virginia State Water Control Board because they did not submit all the plans required by law and yet they proceeded to cut down trees along the path of the pipeline. They did not follow the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's instructions while cutting the trees. They were served a "Notice of Violation" because they cut trees too close to streams.

If Dominion can't follow directions to cut a tree down, how can we trust them to follow directions with the largest fracked gas pipeline in Virginia and the largest soil disturbance since the interstate highways were built?

The truth is we can't.

The sedimentation onto adjacent landscapes and into our streams during construction of these pipelines has been and will be, a constant quagmire of pollution and injustice. If these projects move forward, there will be unprecedented damage to our environment and a litany of lawsuits.

Below are my suggestions on how Gov. Northam can "do it right" and avoid these very avoidable consequences.

First, he should halt all construction for the MVP and the ACP until a proper review has been completed by FERC as requested by Sen. Tim Kaine and members of Congress from both parties. There are many studies that show that these pipelines are not needed.

Second, the administration should require the stream-by-stream, detailed construction plans for every stream and wetland crossing promised by our governor and demanded by the citizens of this Commonwealth. If Virginia's State Water Control Board cannot conclude that these plans will ensure that state water quality standards will not be violated, then it must deny 401 certification.

Dominion has a long history of disregard for the law. They also have multiple "Notices of Violations" from Virginia and West Virginia.

Based on Dominion's track record for environmental stewardship I don't believe for a moment that these pipelines can be built without violating our water quality standards and our rights.

Gov. Northam, you and you alone can make this right. It's time for your administration and its agencies to put the citizens of this Commonwealth — our health and safety — above the corporate interests putting us, and our environment, at risk.

