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Sinkholes Show How Deep We'd Be In It With Pipeline

I've seen a lot of sinkholes in my day. Holes in the earth that just open up—overnight. It's really kind of scary. Yesterday, our neighbor Scott Miller texted me a picture of a sinkhole he could “drive a tractor into.” It had opened up—overnight.

Jeanne, my wife, and Val, our border collie, headed over there to take a look. “You can't miss it,” he said. “It's in the east pasture. I put a temporary fence around it.”

It was bigger than it looked from a distance. I climbed the fence and stood at the edge of the hole. Shockingly, I could not see the bottom. It was like looking into a volcano. I couldn't see the end of the hole because it disappears at an angle into the earth.

The diagonal hole is actually twenty-feet deep. The mouth of the opening is nine-feet wide and seven-feet long. Scott was right, the hole could swallow a tractor, a cow, or our Jeep.

“How deep is the pipeline going to be?” Jeanne asked.

“Ten feet,” I replied.

The proposed route of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline (ACP), 42-inches in diameter, transporting unnecessary, fracked-gas, across private land is two and a half miles from the gaping hole I was standing over. Many people including professional geologists do not believe Dominion can build the largest high-pressure, natural-gas pipeline they have ever built, in this kind of geology without risk.

When the earth collapses, creating a 20-foot-deep crater, it has the potential to crack the foundation of a house, a building...or a pipeline. How can Dominion say they can build a safe, stable, 42-inch pipeline, through our sinkhole riddled terrain? Do not believe for a minute anyone can do this without tremendous risk.

Last year, in Augusta County, VDOT shut down a lane of Interstate-81 to fix a sinkhole that had opened up. There was another the year before as well. And yet another in 2015 in Stuarts Draft that was 30-feet wide exposing a Dominion transmission line. They moved their transmission line but left the responsibility to fix the sinkhole with the landowners.

<https://www.newsleader.com/story/news/local/2015/11/14/sinkhole-sparks-safety-pipeline-concerns/75768270/>

Augusta County has the widest and most active sinkhole geology in Virginia. This type of geology is called karst. It occurs anywhere limestone rock underlies the earth's surface. Limestone has different degrees of hardness. When water dissolves the softer rock, it leaves a growing void beneath the surface. Eventually the weight of the earth above the void collapses—creating a sinkhole.

This type of geology also forms caves, cracks, and solution channels. We live over rock formations that resemble the holes in Swiss cheese.

There are thousands of documented sinkholes published in the Soil Survey of Augusta County. The ACP is planned to go through more than thirty known sinkholes in this county. But it's the undocumented, new ones—that open up overnight, that pose a threat to the pipeline and anyone near the gas that might escape from a tiny crack in the pipe.

The proposed route of the ACP through this shifting landscape defies logic.

“Anyone who grew up in this Valley can tell you that sinkholes appear out of nowhere, could be after a lot of rain, could be when we don't have enough rain. Or it could be just because the valley floor is riddled with limestone caves. They swallow cows, fences, and in some instances houses. Believe that,” wrote Scott Miller.

Whitescarver is a farmer, retired soil conservationist with USDA, and concerned Augusta County citizen. Contact him at bobby.whitescarver@gettingmoreontheground.com.