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Wild Virginia Calls on Forest Service and BLM to Reject Insufficient Draft Environmental Assessment for Mountain Valley Pipeline

In a letter sent today to officials of the U.S. Forest Service and the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Wild Virginia is urging the two agencies to reject the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) prepared for the Mountain Valley Pipeline (MVP). That DEIS was released by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) on September 16, 2016 for public review. Comments to FERC are due by December 22, 2016. However, agencies and citizens have identified major deficiencies in the information and analyses in the DEIS that make it impossible for public comments to be fully informed and effective.

As a “cooperating agency,” the Forest Service and BLM would normally use FERC’s Environmental Assessments as the basis for their decisions. The Forest Service may not allow the pipeline to cross the Jefferson National Forest unless all procedural requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) are met and all natural resources are appropriately protected and BLM shares responsibility with the Forest Service because both National Forest and lands supervised by the National Park Service, such as the Appalachian Trail and Blue Ridge Parkway could be affected. At this time, though, the pipeline company has failed or refused to provide much important information the federal resources agencies and others have requested and FERC’s descriptions and analyses of possible impacts on the environment are incomplete and often fail to meet professional standards. Because the public must have this information, at this stage, to make effective comments on the project, the DEIS must be rewritten and a new comment period opened. These issues cannot legally be deferred until later steps in the NEPA process.

Therefore, Wild Virginia is asking the Forest Service and BLM to push FERC to prepare a revised DEIS, to correct the problems with the current version. If FERC refuses, the Forest Service and BLM can and should initiate their own process to make sure all necessary information is gathered and analyzed in time for the public to understand and make appropriate comments and for the agencies themselves to fulfill their legal duties. Ernie Reed, Wild Virginia’s President, stated: “we are depending on the Forest Service and BLM to insist on a fair and open process by FERC. If that fails, then these guardians of our public lands must act on their own initiative.”

The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) has requested, among many other items, that the pipeline company investigate conditions and threats in what the USFS has designated “high-hazard” areas, in a letter sent to FERC on October 24. EQT, the applicant for approval of the MVP, has not submitted this material and, even if a submittal were made immediately, the public and agencies will have been deprived of the time to review that information fully, under FERC’s schedule. “This information is vital for understanding the true impacts the pipeline would have and to protect these irreplaceable public treasures,” according to Misty Boos, Director of Wild Virginia. In the Forest Service’s words from the October 24 letter, the information is necessary “[to] further clarify the likelihood that the MVP can be constructed through the National Forest without undue risk of resource damage.”

“We have looked at FERC’s record of environmental reviews on natural gas pipelines and found that their Draft EIS documents are routinely deficient. Further, FERC often discounts and ignores their federal partners’ requests for additional information and justifications. We won’t stand by and see that happen in this case,” said David Sligh, Conservation Director at Wild Virginia.

Wild Virginia is a grassroots, non-profit organization dedicated to preserving wild forest ecosystems in Virginia’s National Forests through education and advocacy. Our members, throughout Virginia and beyond, treasure the common natural heritage and treasures OUR National Forests provide. For more information, visit: <http://wildvirginia.org/>