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For Immediate Release

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40 Groups Call for Fair and Open Federal Review of Mountain Valley Pipeline: Forest Service and BLM Must Not Rush Environmental Reviews

Today, organizations representing millions of Americans called on officials in the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to respect the public's proper role in decisions about the Mountain Valley Pipeline (MVP) and the future of our shared resources. The groups are asking for a public comment period to help guide the agencies' deliberations before the officials release a new draft environmental review, warning that a rushed process could lead to poorly supported decisions, like those twice rejected by the courts.

The MVP is a proposed 303-mile fracked gas pipeline that would cross some of the steepest slopes in the Appalachian regions of Virginia and West Virginia, including the Jefferson National Forest (JNF). The project, originally projected to be in service by 2020, is years behind schedule, more than \$3 billion over budget, and, according to MVP's own filings, only 55.8% complete. Construction, which began in 2018, under now voided authorizations, has led to over 450 water-quality-related violations in Virginia and West Virginia.

Responding to requests to allow the MVP to cross the JNF, and as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the USFS and BLM plan to publish a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) to describe the impacts of the MVP on the environment and our communities. In a November 17, 2022 Notice of Intent (NOI), the USFS projected that a draft SEIS could be completed and available for public comment in January, 2023.

However, this schedule skips an important step in the review. Under NEPA, the agencies can issue a "scoping notice" to solicit public comments on the proper range of issues to be addressed in the SEIS. Scoping is necessary to ensure that all pertinent information and analysis is included in the SEIS. The public has information and concerns that must be considered early in the decision-making processes, to ensure sound results. This NEPA review should, at minimum, address all of the issues that prompted a federal appeals court to reject the previous approvals and new information that has come to light since the previous SEIS was prepared,

including the record of widespread and frequent water violations and the harms that have resulted.

As stated in the letter, the groups “are deeply concerned that . . . the Forest Service already has a thumb on the scales by proposing ‘to amend the Jefferson National Forest Land Management Plan as necessary to allow for the MVP to cross the Jefferson National Forest.’” Such an amendment to the Forest management plan, by which all other parties must abide, for the benefit of one destructive project, would allow environmental degradation in the Forest that is clearly inconsistent with standards laid out in the JNF management plan.

The public has been deeply involved in all agency decisions related to the MVP over the past eight years. The groups signing this letter and the scores of individuals affected by this decision have a right to a fair and open deliberative process by two agencies that are obligated to protect us and the natural treasures under their supervision. The officials addressed in the letter must meet the highest standards underlying our environmental laws. If they do so, the facts will show that MVP must not be allowed to degrade our National Forest lands.

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"As a coalition of groups and people directly impacted by the Mountain Valley Pipeline, we demand an opportunity to share how the pipeline will destroy the Jefferson National Forest and impact us," said **Russell Chisholm, Mountain Valley Watch Coordinator and frontline MVP organizer.**

“The US government failed to recognize treaties made with the Indigenous People before the formation of the United States, and our burial mounds, land and water are being disturbed and left unprotected. Several hundred Indigenous people were left out of the NEPA process to provide comments at MVP’s start, as few tribal officials were contacted and insufficient communication did not reach those in rural areas,” stated **Dr. Crystal Cavalier-Keck, Co-Founder, 7 Directions of Service.** “The Forest Service must take every opportunity to improve outreach to Indigenous peoples and improve public engagement.”

“The Mountain Valley Pipeline is yet again trying to tear across the spectacular Jefferson National Forest, decimating streams and devastating local communities,” said **Jill Gottesman, Southern Appalachian Landscape Director for The Wilderness Society.** “Courts have twice struck down MVP’s attempt to cut across the forest, so we find it deeply troubling that the U.S. Forest Service is now proposing to allow MVP to do just that, rushing forward without first involving the public. Americans depend on the Forest Service to safeguard our national forests, not bow to pressure from the oil and gas industry. We’ve stopped this fracked-gas pipeline

before, and we won't stop fighting until the Jefferson National Forest and surrounding communities are protected."

"Allowing the Mountain Valley Pipeline to despoil our public lands would be deplorable," stated **David Sligh, Conservation Director at Wild Virginia**. "A proper review by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management must fully incorporate and respect the information and values of the people, not cut corners to favor a powerful corporation. The failure to make decisions that truly served the public interest over private gain led to illegal decisions twice before. The Biden administration must not follow that failed approach."

"Many of our Indigenous peoples in the MVP path are considered fence-line communities and are intimidated by landmen who only want to extract at the cheapest price. It's a shame and dishonor to the hundreds of ancestors buried and current American Indians living on ancestral lands of Virginia, West Virginia and North Carolina, including those in or near national forest land," said **Jason Keck, Co-Founder, 7 Directions of Service**.

"There is an important principle at stake here," says **Karena Gore, executive director of the Center for Earth Ethics at Union Theological Seminary**. "The government should not hand over public land to private interests who damage it -- all for the sake of a project that not only does not benefit the public, but could do considerable harm. The communities who live within a natural landscape are those who know it best, and they deserve to have their voices heard about all the dimensions of value and meaning that might not be cared about or counted by outside interests. Ethics must inform development, and the ethical course of action in this case is to respect local communities' relationship to the natural world they live in."

"Many of the MVP's current legal problems trace back to inadequacies of the initial Scoping and Public Comment periods and the failure of agencies to take public comments seriously enough," said **Howdy Henritz, president of the Indian Creek Watershed Association** in southern West Virginia. "Since then, the scope of known hazards of the MVP project has broadened -- from new federal listings of endangered species, to destabilization of precipitation patterns affecting pipeline safety, to MVP's track record of construction plan failures and repeated environmental violations, and more. We call on the Forest Service to *protect* the lands entrusted to it. Open a Scoping period. Be a good neighbor as well as a good steward of this country's irreplaceable forests, cultural heritage and water resources."