

**USDA Forest Service
DECISION NOTICE AND
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
for the
Natural Gas Pipeline Construction Project, Proposed by Columbia Gas
of Virginia for service to Celanese Plant in Giles County, Virginia.**

George Washington and Jefferson National Forests
Eastern Divide Ranger District
Giles County, Virginia

INTRODUCTION

An Environmental Assessment (EA) evaluating a no action alternative and an action alternative for the construction of a buried 12-inch natural gas pipeline to serve the Celanese Acetate LLC (Celanese) Plant has been completed. The project area is located on Peters Mountain, north of the Celanese Plant near Narrows, Virginia. Please see the attached map in Appendix B. The purpose of this new line is to provide adequate natural gas service to the Celanese Plant, allowing for the conversion from coal-fired boilers to natural gas-fired boilers.

The Peters Mountain area lies primarily in Giles County, Virginia with most of the area north of the ridge line in Monroe County, West Virginia. This entire project is in Giles County, Virginia. National Forest System lands are primarily vegetated with upland hardwoods, with a few yellow pines on the southern aspects of finger ridges.

DECISION

Based on the analysis discussed in the EA, I have selected Alternative 1 (the proposed action) to allow for the construction of the gas line and to authorize the long-term special use permit for the operation and maintenance of the pipeline. This project is summarized below.

The Forest Service received a Special Use application from Columbia Gas of Virginia (CGV) to construct a buried 12-inch, coated steel natural gas distribution line across Peters Mountain to provide additional service to the Celanese Plant near Narrows, VA. This entire line is 18,488 feet with about 4,238 feet of it on National Forest lands over Peters Mountain to Celanese. The project location parallels an existing buried 6-inch natural gas line already permitted to CGV, which will remain an active line. See attached map for location.

The proposed action is to permit construction of the line and issue a long-term special use permit for its operation and maintenance. The current easement area covers the existing 6-inch line. Construction of the new 12-inch line would require a cleared corridor next to this current easement. New clearing will range from 75 feet to 125 feet in width, depending on terrain and placement along the pipeline.

The cleared area will be used for soil stockpiling, pipeline preparation, and temporary access route to the construction area. An approximately 6-foot deep and 6-foot wide trench would be excavated next to the existing 6-inch line. The excavated material will be returned to the trench upon completion of the pipeline. Some permanent grading will be required over the trench to provide necessary cover over the pipe. After the pipe is placed, a 40-foot wide easement area will be maintained long-term for inspection and maintenance. This 40-foot area will encompass the existing easement. The rest of the cleared area will eventually return to a forested condition. Any grading required outside of the easement area will be returned to as close to preconstruction contours as practical.

An approximately 20,000-square foot (or about 0.5 acre) temporary staging area just west of the existing corridor and southwest of the ridgeline of Peters Mountain will also be permitted. The location of this staging area was altered from the site shown on CGV's application to move it from the top of Peters Mountain and away from the Appalachian Trail (AT). This change allows for substantial reduced impacts on hikers and on long-term scenic quality of the area.

The existing pipeline crosses the AT at two points; the top of Peters Mountain and the bottom of Peters Mountain near Virginia State Route 641 (Clendennin Road). The construction near Clendennin Road should take 2 to 3 days. It will be easy to reroute the AT with on-site signing and temporary blazes to move hikers around the construction site. No ground disturbance is needed for this reroute as the woods are gently-sloped and open at this location.

The trail and pipeline cross at nearly right angles on top of Peters Mountain, where the AT goes over the grassy corridor on nearly flat terrain. As described above, the original proposed staging area was at this location. In addition to moving the staging area, the proposal was modified as follows to address safety and resource concerns.

- A barrier fence to restricted access will be placed around the vicinity of the AT (at the ridgeline) prior to any activity and will remain in place for the duration of the project. This fence will enclose an area about 50' uphill from traverse point #1027 on the north side of the ridge to the top of the staging area on the south side of the ridge and about 300' wide. It will be an orange plastic mesh barrier fence, about 4 feet high and will be clearly signed as a "Do not enter" area. Construction activity inside the fence will be limited to the movement of equipment and supplies a few times a day for the majority of the project. The exception to this will be when the pipeline is actually installed inside the fence (limited to an August 1 to September 30 period as described below).
- Gates will be installed in this perimeter fence where it crosses the AT. These gates will be staffed during all periods of construction activity for the length of the project, anticipated to be from April to October 2014. These gates will be closed to hikers only when equipment is inside the area. In the rare occasion when this equipment is inside the perimeter fence for more than a few minutes, hikers will only be permitted to cross the area with escort from contractor personnel.

- Installation of the pipeline inside the perimeter fence will be limited to a construction period of August 1 to September 30. This is the time of the year that has the fewest hikers while still being inside the construction season (April through November). Two interior security fences will be installed, paralleling the trail. During construction in this section, the AT will remain passable. For the short amount of time the area right at the AT needs to be trenched, a bridge will be installed over the trench with a design provided by the contractor and approved by the Forest Service. The gates in the perimeter fence at the AT crossing locations will be staffed during all construction activity and when not staffed, these gates will be left open with the area along the trail safe for public use.
- Clearing and grubbing of the corridor inside the restricted area is anticipated to occur prior to May 15th, 2014. If it is not done before May 15th, it will not be allowed until the August 1 to September 30 construction period.
- Any disposal of cleared timber and brush will occur outside of the restricted area.
- Prior to initiating clearing, CGV and the contractor will work with the Forest Service to minimize clearing within the 125-foot maximum clearing corridor where possible; particularly at the top of the small ridge most visible from US 460. This location was field-reviewed with the contractor and a Forest Service Landscape Architect.
- The staging area will be located just west of the existing corridor and southwest of the ridgeline of Peters Mountain, as flagged in the field on April 22, 2013.
- A specific erosion and sediment control plan will be developed by Columbia Gas of Virginia and reviewed and approved by the Forest Service.
- Sediment control structures of hay bales and/or silt fences would be installed along gradient sides of all work areas and the staging area.
- A protective cover, such as mulch, will be applied on disturbed areas where needed to prevent accelerated erosion during construction or before the next growing season.
- Schedule, to the extent practicable, construction activities to avoid direct soil and water disturbance during periods of the year when heavy precipitation and runoff are likely.
- Limit the amount of exposed or disturbed soil at any one time to the minimum necessary to complete construction operations.
- A specific revegetation plan will be developed by Columbia Gas of Virginia and reviewed and approved by the Forest Service, including the seed mix.

- If any cultural resources are located during project implementation, all work will stop until the resources can be evaluated by the Forest Service Archeologist, in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office, Department of Historic Resources.
- Information concerning this project will be posted on the following web sites to alert hikers: www.appalachiantrail.org, www.nps.gov/appa, www.fs.usda.gov/gwj. Information will also be posted at the Clendennin Road (Virginia State Route 641) and Stony Creek Road (Virginia State Route 635) crossings and at Pine Swamp and Docs Knob trail shelters.
- Portable toilet facilities will be made available for use by all construction crew personnel for the duration of the project.
- Two existing access routes will be utilized as part of this project. These roads are in place but will require some maintenance. All road maintenance activities will be approved by the Forest Engineer. These roads, which are currently unclassified roads, will be part of the special use permit. Columbia Gas of Virginia will be required to install a gate to Forest Service specifications at the federal boundary on the lower access road.

Construction activities are anticipated to start in April of 2014 and finish by October of 2014, although there may be some clearing and clean-up beyond this timeframe. The actions shown in bullet form above (except the last two) deal specifically with mitigating the impacts to AT hikers. The Forest Service and Celanese recently reached an agreement on an easement for a relocation of the AT. The relocation is independent of this pipeline project and will move the AT to the east of the pipeline (see yellow line on the attached map). Every effort will be made by Columbia Gas of Virginia, Celanese, the Forest Service, and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) to move the trail to its new location. Getting this relocation completed prior to the start of pipeline construction would eliminate the need for the measures described in the bullets above as the AT would no longer overlap with the pipeline corridor.

There is potential for the establishment of non-native invasive species due to the stirring of the soil and opening created within the cleared corridor. The application of herbicide to treat non-native invasive plants is authorized in the Decision Notice for the "George Washington and Jefferson National Forests Forest-wide Non-Native Invasive Plant Control" (12/14/2010) and therefore is not be part of the proposed action for this project. However, non-native invasive species and the use of herbicide is addressed in the Monitoring section and in the Environmental Consequences discussion in this EA for several resources.

REASONS FOR THE DECISION

I have chosen Alternative 1 because this alternative meets the purpose of the proposal and can be implemented in a safe and an environmentally sound manner. Alternative 1 adequately provides for hiker safety, and protects visual, cultural, soil, water, and other resources while implementing the project requested by the proponent.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

One other alternative was analyzed and considered in detail. **Alternative 2 - This is the No Action alternative.** This alternative was not selected because it does not satisfy the primary purpose and need for the proposed action.

SCOPING AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A variety of individuals and organizations were contacted to determine the scope of the issues and concerns related to the proposed action. On May 23, 2013, a letter describing the proposal was mailed out to interested citizens, organizations, and government agencies on the District's scoping mailing list. Comments from the May 2013 letter were received from five agencies, organizations or individuals.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

It is my determination that the actions associated with the construction of the new gas line under Alternative 1 of the Natural Gas Pipeline Construction Project, Proposed by Columbia Gas of Virginia for service to Celanese Plant in Giles County, Virginia Project EA are not major federal actions, individually or cumulatively, and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not needed. This finding includes consideration of the following factors concerning the context and intensity of the expected impacts of the alternative.

CONTEXT

The physical and biological effects of this action vary according to the resource area analyzed. These impacts are primarily limited to the immediate areas impacted by clearing and burying a 12-inch gas line across approximately 13 acres of Peters Mountain on the Eastern Divide Ranger District. Both beneficial and adverse impacts of this project have been considered and these activities will not cause a significant effect to the quality of the human environment. (EA, pages 9 through 48).

INTENSITY/SEVERITY

1. Both beneficial and adverse impacts of this project have been considered and these activities will not cause a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, because design criteria and mitigating measures identified in the EA (page 7 and Appendix A) will be implemented to avoid or minimize environmental effects. The physical and biological effects are limited to the immediate project area and access roads. Based on the discussions in the EA, there are no known significant irreversible resource commitments or irretrievable loss of timber production, diversity, wildlife habitat, soil production, water quality, aquatic habitat, old growth habitat, or recreational opportunities (EA, pages 9 through 48).
2. There will be no major effect on public health or safety. Mitigation measures to provide for Appalachian Trail hiker safety have been identified (Appendix A). The pipeline crossing of Clendennin Road (VA 641) is outside this project area and under the jurisdiction of the Virginia State Corporation Commission.
3. The unique characteristics of the geographic area (historic or cultural resources, wetlands, floodplains, and ecologically critical areas, etc.) will not be significantly affected. No perennial or intermittent riparian protection zones will be impacted on National Forest lands. The construction areas have been surveyed for cultural resources and all ground-disturbing activities located away from found sites (EA, pages 37 and 38).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. Disclosure of environmental impacts is based upon widely accepted principles resulting from sound scientific research (EA, pages 9 through 48).
5. The project does not involve highly uncertain, unique, or unknown environmental risks. The construction methods and herbicides to be used have a known history; subsequent results are predictable (EA, pages 9 through 48).
6. The proposed actions will not establish a precedent influencing approval of future actions with significant effects nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. The scope of this decision is limited to the immediate construction of a 12-inch natural gas line impacting approximately 13 acres of National Forest System lands (EA, pages 1 through 4).
7. In relation to other actions with individually insignificant impacts, it will not be cumulatively significant (EA, pages 9 through 48 Cumulative Effects Analysis for each resource). Soil productivity will not be significantly affected when combined with other ongoing, past or future projects within the watershed. (EA, 22 through 29).
8. There are no effects to any cultural resources listed, eligible for listing, or potentially eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. All areas of disturbance have been screened for the presence of historical sites (EA, page 37 and 38).

9. The proposed actions will not adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat. A Biological Evaluation has been completed for this action (EA, pages 19 through 22 and the Biological Evaluation).

Regarding the Indiana bat, an endangered species, there is no critical habitat on the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests (GWJNF). Cumulatively, there is a forested environment where more than 60% of all forest types are maintained in an age class of 70 years old or older pursuant to the Forest's strategy and Biological Opinion (BO). Additionally, there is a forested environment where more than 40% of the white oak-northern red oak-hickory and yellow poplar-white oak-northern red oak forest (forest types 53/56) are maintained in an age class of 80 years old or older pursuant to the Forest's strategy and BO. In conjunction with these two age-class provisions of the Forest's strategy, cumulatively, potential roost trees, potential maternity sites and foraging habitat will be provided across the GWJNF to offset the trees removed by this project.

Furthermore, the existing standards from the two Forest Plans provide for a significant number of secure summer and fall foraging areas, and a steady supply of potential roost trees and maternity sites across the two National Forests. The Forest Plans identify approximately 1,175,400 acres (66% of the Forest land base) as unsuitable for timber harvest. These lands will provide a continuous supply of potential roost trees, potential maternity sites, and foraging habitat for Indiana bats. These are also well distributed across the Forests and occur intermixed with stands in the suitable land base. The Plans provide that these areas will remain undisturbed by most human processes that could result in direct removal of trees.

Concluding, the agency feels there is adequate overall habitat even with this action for the maintenance and promotion of Indiana bats across the GWJNF. In conjunction with the entire Forest's strategy, the Terms and Conditions of the BO, cumulatively, the potential but very unlikely loss of individual adult and young bats because of this action will not jeopardize the continued existence of overall Indiana bat populations across the GWJNF. Thus, this action will not have a significant cumulative effect on the Indiana bat when viewed in conjunction with past, present, and future activities.

10. The proposed action does not threaten a violation of any Federal, State, or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. (EA, pages 1 through 54)

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

Forest Plan Consistency

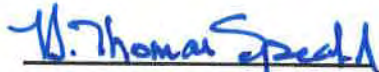
The Forest Plan has been reviewed to determine whether the decision being made is consistent with the present management area direction, the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), and other laws and regulations. This action is consistent with the Forest Plan Standards pertaining to Management Prescriptions 4A-Appalachian National Scenic Trail Corridor and 8A1-Mix of Successional Habitats.

PRE-DECISIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW

This project was subject to the Project-Level Pre-decisional Administrative Review Process ("Objection" Process) pursuant to 36 CFR 218 Subparts A and B. The objection period closed November 12, 2013.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Since no objection was received, this Decision Notice can be signed 5 business days following the end of the of objection filing period, which is November 19, 2013 and the project can be implemented immediately after this approval.


H. THOMAS SPEAKS, Jr.
Forest Supervisor

11-22-2013
Date



Map of Columbia Gas Lines, Acquisition of Celanese Lands, Exchange of USA Tract 1732, and Appalachian Trail Relocation

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