Testimony: People’s Tribunal on Human Rights and

Environmental Justice Impacts of Pipelines

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David Sligh

My name is David Sligh and I represent the conservation group Wild Virginia and, by the way, my ancestors who have also been in this area since the early 1700s. I tell people they came here and when others decided to keep

moving west they said “why would we leave?”

Economists have a term - “externalization” - to describe where parties pass the costs and negative consequences of their actions to others. Companies are also said to “distribute” their costs. Damages to the environment and public health are among the kinds of costs often externalized or distributed.

Powerful interests favor such benign-sounding terms, because they conceal an ugly side of their operations. They sound technical, neutral - they take the humanity and the rights of nature out of the equation. We’re here today to ensure that those sides are heard and valued.

In blunter, more honest terms, so-called externalization is a process through which corporations impose upon the rest of us, dumping the costs of doing business onto others while they reap the profits. Some of those costs are born by the wider society, some fall with brutal, crushing weight on individuals and communities. And those who can least afford the losses often pay the most.

If the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and the Mountain Valley Pipeline go forward, the costs to natural ecosystems and to the people who value and depend on them - so-called external costs - will be enormous. These projects would be among the most destructive ventures to mar Virginia’s environment in our lifetimes. The damages would be felt on every level - local, regional, statewide, and beyond - some harms would be permanent, some could be devastating. They would destroy private and public property interests, disrupt lives, and endanger our future - all in the name of short-term profits.

I’ve been asked to broadly describe the environmental costs we face if these pipelines are built. To catalog all those potential damages would take much longer than the time I’m allotted but I will attempt to explain some of the environmental and health risks we could face.

In cutting a swath as wide as an interstate highway across the landscape and through our precious forests and waterbodies, each pipeline would leave a trail of destruction whose true magnitude we cannot yet know.

The ACP and MVP projects would cause widespread disruption and even destruction of aquatic and terrestrial habitats, the discharge of pollution to waterbodies, the fragmentation of valuable forests, and the impairment or elimination of human uses from streams, groundwater, and our lands - whether those properties are publicly or privately owned.

The pipeline companies want to cross through thousands of streams and wetlands and to disrupt the ecological health of watersheds. Cumulative impacts will affect major river basins, including the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers, the James River, and the Roanoke River.

Many highly sensitive waterbodies would be affected, ranging from mountain trout streams, to habitats for endangered and threatened species, to unique wetland communities. And construction is proposed to occur in some of the most challenging environments in the U.S. The route through the western portion of Virginia would cross many areas with very steep slopes, highly erodible soils, and records of frequent landslides. Most construction companies, which routinely expect to abide by runoff control requirements, would never propose to build in these types of environments, because the standard measures simply will not protect water quality and they know it.

The destruction of forests and native plants and the excavation of huge trenches for the pipelines would result in the discharge of thousands of tons of sediments and other pollutants into our waters. By digging, cutting, or even blasting through stream bottoms, the companies would release more pollution but would also fundamentally alter the physical features and vital habitats in those waters. State agency scientists have stated that the natural functions of those ecosystems could be eliminated.

The threats to groundwater, on which many thousands of people depend, through public and private water supply wells and springs, are dire. Many cannot be avoided and the damages, once created, will sometimes be irreversible. These threats are particularly great in the valleys between the Alleghany and Blue Ridge Mountains, where bedrock is largely composed of limestone, known as karst terrain. There, the same characteristics that have formed beautiful caves allow contaminants in water from the surface to contaminate people’s wells and springs miles away and sometimes very quickly. And the flow patterns themselves can be disrupted by heavy construction, making water supplies go dry or ruining their usefulness.

Pipelines, and particularly the compressor stations like that proposed for Buckingham County can affect the very air we breathe. People in these areas are threatened with emissions which may include methane, nitrous oxides, particulate matter, and other volatile organic compounds. Such releases greatly increase the risk of health problems for people in local areas, especially those who already have respiratory diseases or other illnesses. The entire pipeline system will, cumulatively, release huge amounts of methane, an extraordinarily potent greenhouse gas.

It must be remembered that the values nature provides to humans are, in very significant part, in its peace and beauty. People who live in rural areas and who would be affected by these bad projects have, in many cases, chosen to stay there or to move there largely because of the natural features. None can deny the value of having a clear stream flowing near their doors or through their fields or in the nearby woods - just look at real estate listings and you’ll see that such features are clearly of real economic value, in addition to the spiritual and health benefits. These same values, no matter where we live or what we personally own, are available to us all through public lands, such as the National Forest areas the pipeline companies propose to destroy. Our public lands in Virginia provide some of the greatest areas of intact, connected forest habitats in the eastern U.S. These features are part of our heritage. They are a treasure that we all own and can all use - we may not be large private landholders but we are all rich, as long as we maintain and protect these precious forests.

I can personally testify about natural places that would be damaged by each of these pipelines. My career, my life, have been nurtured in streams like Craigs Creek, where the MVP proposes to blast through bedrock, rip out riparian forest, and create havoc. I have loved to paddle that Jackson River in the area where ACP wants to change the environment in ways they can never adequately repair - no matter how much they promise.

These pipelines would take something from me and from you that cannot be replaced. The speakers to follow will help put the human faces on the losses that could occur unless we stop these irresponsible projects. Thank you.