Kimberly Dilts Testimony

Hello from Pocahontas County, West Virginia. This is the birthplace of rivers. We have eight rivers that start in Pocahontas County. All water flows out of the county, no water flows into the county. So it's a really, really special place and we are totally threatened by the Atlantic Coast pipeline which is proposed to run straight through our County to cross 65 water crossings and 25 wetlands. I believe it's about 16 miles that that will be crossed in Pocahontas County and it's heartbreaking. It's a big long story here in West Virginia as I'm sure many of you know. West Virginia is essentially an extraction state. We've kind of been like a colony of the United States. Everything has been taken out and nothing has been brought back or been put back into West Virginia. So that has left us at the bottom of the barrel on all accounts where the poorest, least educated, highest opioid epidemic, highest high school dropout rate, teen pregnancy, anything that you can imagine that seems like a negative statistic we are proudly at the forefront of it.

But that being said, I think this is probably one of the most beautiful places on the planet and it's probably one of the most special ecosystems in the country and in the world and we don't have the numbers or we don't have the population or the economic pull to protect ourselves. Most of southern West Virginia has fallen victim to coal mining as many people know and now northern West Virginia has fallen victim to fracking. There's been gas extraction north in West Virginia for a long time but fracking is in the last few decades and it has been totally devastating.

This pipeline that is proposed will carry fracked gas through our district. Theoretically it will just carry the fracked gas through our district but from the whispers that I hear the eventual end is to frack here. We have Marcellus shale and we have Utica Shale which both have gas locked into them so we are definitely on the long term list of endangered places in this country and this ACP pipeline that threatens to go through our district sums up all of the horrible things that you can imagine happening to your community. We get very little tax dollars off of it. We get zero jobs. The pipeline itself will be built by contracted laborers who will come in from the outside. They're presently building man camps or clearing spaces to put up RVs so their workers can live in them. In the next town over Dominion has already rented lots of land to fill up with their end loaders and their buses to carry their workers to and from the work site and from the work site to where they're staying.

The pipeline basically is putting everything that we hold dear at risk. Our greatest resource here is our water obviously and when you have a fracked gas pipeline running all under your water systems, under your rivers, your springs, your wells, your creeks, basically nothing is safe. What's more than that our underground terrain is essentially limestone karst so once you get a methane leak in a pipeline and it's spitting out a little bit of methane, colorless, odorless, really difficult to detect, it's essentially just weaving through the Swiss cheese of limestone karst and it can show up anywhere. It can show up 20 miles away from where the pipeline is. I mean there's no way of knowing this labyrinth of underground limestone karst that we have. There's no way of knowing where the gas would go.

Everything about this is dangerous. I think the scariest part of this is that people feel like they don't have the power to fight it. The gas companies are really big. They're really powerful. They have lots of money and they speak to us as if they are our saving grace. They essentially treat us as if we need them and West Virginia has kind of turned into the abused child as in: we're isolated, we don't have resources, we don't have a way of getting help from the outside and the energy companies come and they sell us a really poor package and we buy it because we don't generally know better. But it's easy to see that this is something that will be absolutely to no advantage to us. It will decimate all quality of life for Pocahontas County. Our future is essentially an industrial gas wasteland. Who wants to move to a beautiful mountainous region that has a methane or a natural gas pipeline that has slow methane leaks throughout it? Who wants to move to a place that has that? Who wants to invest in a place like that? Tourism is our main industry now and tourists come here for the natural beauty, for the ecological diversity, flora, fauna. People come for hunting and fishing. All of that is at risk because of the pipeline and the saddest part of it is that we don't have the tools to protect ourselves. We're poor. There are not many of us and we've been taught that this is the only way to do things.

West Virginia was essentially formed as an extraction state. Where we're standing now was all logged starting around 1910 1908 and within 50 years they had cleared every tree from this mountainside. Every tree, every mountain was bald. It took them about 50 or 60 years to clear-cut the entire region and by the 60s pretty much they had clear-cut everything. This is all new growth that you see and in some ways I feel like in Pocahontas County we've been protected from the tragedy of coal country. You see clearly how destructive coal is and how destructive it is on the culture, how on for the economy it gives no opportunity for a small local economy. Essentially it's just a big company coming in, taking out all the riches and making their money off of it. Then they’re taking those riches elsewhere and leaving us with polluted water and polluted soil and without even owning the ground that we walk on because the coal companies owned it.

I feel like in Pocahontas County we've been protected to some degree because the trees have grown back. It's not like it was a hundred years ago obviously, but none of us were here 100 years ago so it's hard for us to remember how wrong it is when a company comes in and takes everything out from under you and leaves you with nothing. That's where the cycle started. That's why we're in the position that we're in. That's why when the kids graduate from high school they move away for opportunities out in the rest of the world because there aren't that many opportunities here.

But the fact of the matter is this is one of the most pristine and beautiful places and it’s one of the last precious places left that is really worth protecting. If you look at a map of pipelines you will find that Appalachia is of the places that doesn't have pipelines running through and there are reasons for that. It's really difficult to build a pipeline here. You can't do it without huge environmental impacts and it's heartbreaking to see that we have fallen into a feeling that we cannot fight this because it's completely worth fighting but we definitely need help from the outside. There's just not enough of us. We don't have enough pull and we don't have enough economic pull to stand up to this Goliath which is the gas company. It seems like natural gas is the way. That's what our federal government wants to invest in now and West Virginia is a sacrifice zone to the wants of this theoretical bridge energy, which it's not. It's totally destructive.