

# PREVENTING PIPELINE HARMS

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## WHY IT MATTERS

Continued expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure is at odds with a healthy future for the Commonwealth, and it runs counter to climate mitigation measures recommended by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).<sup>1</sup> Although Virginia has passed laws to promote clean energy and improve accountability measures for public health and safety, new fossil-fuel pipeline projects continue to be licensed and ultimately harm Virginia communities.<sup>2,3</sup> Water and air pollution from fossil fuel development impedes the goals set in federal and state policy, and the resulting harms tend to fall disproportionately on communities of color, households of low-income, and elderly communities.<sup>4</sup>

Construction of new methane-gas pipelines further traps Virginia into fossil fuel dependency. Pipelines can also pose enormous safety risks for those along the route and within the evacuation or blast zone.<sup>5</sup> The operation of these facilities is associated with the emission of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, as well as carbon dioxide emissions driven by end use, and volatile organic compounds and toxic substances, including benzene and formaldehyde during compressor station blowouts.<sup>6</sup> These emissions pose serious consequences to the climate and environment. Ultimately, Virginia communities bear the brunt of negative public health impacts to water and air quality, along with economic harm to farmland and other critical agricultural lands. Virginia must strengthen protections for the water resources and communities jeopardized by fossil fuel infrastructure.

## CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Virginia is home to multiple examples of the negative impacts of fracked-gas pipelines. Construction of the poorly planned Mountain Valley Pipeline (MVP) in Southwest Virginia damaged fragile water resources and ecosystems. MVP accrued over 350+ violations of water quality protections in Virginia, revealing deficiencies in current erosion and sediment control requirements.<sup>7</sup> The pipeline's construction also damaged Indigenous cultural and sacred sites, and adversely impacted rural communities and residents' livelihoods.<sup>8</sup>

The use of degraded construction materials, its route through steep slopes, fragile karst areas and seismic zones, and the lack of odorant in the line now add to the risk of failure or explosion during operation.<sup>9</sup> MVP received unprecedented Congressional interference via the pipeline's inclusion in the unrelated 2023

Fiscal Responsibility Act.<sup>10</sup> This set a dangerous precedent for Virginia's autonomy to protect its natural resources and should signal the need to strengthen environmental review processes.

If fully operational, MVP could be responsible for nearly 1% of all US energy sector greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>11</sup> That massive increase in emissions is reason enough to limit new methane-gas infrastructure, as the impacts on our climate are felt widely through intensified weather and recurrent flooding in both coastal and inland areas. New infrastructure negates the climate progress Virginia has made in recent years.

Unfortunately, more pipeline expansion projects are now proposed for Southside and Eastern Virginia. The proposed Southgate extension of Mountain Valley Pipelines and the Southeast Supply Enhancement Project would both be large, high-pressure pipelines routed through Pittsylvania County, the site of multiple existing lines and polluting compressor stations. The Virginia Reliability Project would be constructed through eastern counties in areas already overburdened with existing infrastructure and pollution.<sup>12</sup> These projects would negatively impact wetlands and private wells – especially in areas prone to recurrent flooding and sea level rise.

## OPPORTUNITIES

New fossil fuel infrastructure should not be pursued as we work towards our clean energy goals in Virginia. We have learned from projects like the Mountain Valley Pipeline that current laws and regulations do not adequately protect water resources, public health, or the environment from the construction of new fossil fuel infrastructure. MVP's violations highlight the dangers of construction in fragile karst landscapes and through seismic zones and reinforce the need for agencies to hear from local communities about the real-world impacts they experience from pipeline construction.

Absent a ban, any new fossil fuel build-out, including both interstate and intrastate pipelines, must be thoroughly and holistically scrutinized through processes that fully engage and respect the public's views and interests. Fossil fuel projects should receive a comprehensive review, including cumulative health and environmental impacts on nearby communities. For projects already in process, enforcement of pollution laws must be prioritized, and companies must be held fully accountable, regardless of project completion or abandonment. Review processes should include bonding requirements for appropriate fund-

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ing or insurance coverage, and include stringent environmental restoration requirements.

Virginia lawmakers can strengthen state review of projects and increase public involvement and participation in those reviews and streamline opportunities to report problems. Ultimately, policy improvements could be used to appropriately address the current climate crisis, prevent future harm, and protect and restore communities and areas negatively impacted by existing projects.

## TOP TAKEAWAYS

New fossil fuel infrastructure increases greenhouse gas emissions and is harmful to the health and safety of Virginians. New construction should be limited.

Methane-gas pipelines that are proposed and built without bonding or safety funding requirements leave communities and local emergency services footing costs if the pipeline is abandoned or has a leak or explosion.

Communities are often left without proper notice of surveying, route changes, and permit review dates. Public access to information about proposed projects should be increased.

## ENDNOTES

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