

# PREVENTING NEW FOSSIL FUEL INFRASTRUCTURE

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## WHY IT MATTERS

Virginia faces a pivotal choice: expand fossil fuel infrastructure that endangers public health and the climate, or accelerate a just transition to clean energy that protects communities and lowers energy costs. Surging electricity demand from data centers—21% of Dominion Energy’s sales in 2022<sup>1</sup>—is driving new fossil fuel proposals and complicating the retirement of aging coal plants. The Joint Legislative Audit & Review Commission warns data center energy demand could double within a decade.<sup>2</sup>

Fossil fuel facilities, including fracked gas and coal-fired power plants, pipelines, and export terminals, emit pollutants that degrade air and water quality and accelerate climate change.<sup>3</sup> The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that “climate change is causing dangerous and widespread disruption in nature,”<sup>4</sup> and Virginia is already experiencing these impacts through recurrent flooding, sea-level rise, and intensifying storms that threaten infrastructure, agriculture, and public safety.<sup>5</sup>

Fossil fuel dependence causes price volatility by tying Virginia to unpredictable global markets, causing significant energy bill spikes in recent years.<sup>6</sup> Clean energy offers more stable, long-term protection for households. Nationally, new power plant costs are now at a 10-year high, while wind and solar remain the most affordable.<sup>7</sup>

Pollution burdens are not shared equally. The 2020 Virginia Department of Environmental Quality Environmental Justice Study found that fossil fuel infrastructure is disproportionately located in low-income and Black and Brown communities. These communities are 1.5 times more likely to live within one mile of a major polluting facility and experience asthma hospitalization rates up to 2.5 times the state average.<sup>8</sup> Eliminating fossil fuel generation in Virginia could prevent up to 32 premature deaths annually and save up to \$355 million in health costs.<sup>9</sup>

Virginia’s path forward is clear: an equitable transition to renewable energy that protects our environment, public health, and communities, not continued fossil fuel expansion that deepens existing harms.

## CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Virginia has long relied on fossil fuels, and this reliance has wreaked havoc across the Commonwealth. In Southwest Virginia, coal mining contributes to elevated rates of cancer, black lung, and heart disease.<sup>10,11</sup> Reclamation efforts fall short, compounding the burden on rural and low-income residents.<sup>12</sup> Despite bearing the brunt of cumulative environmental and

health harms, communities most affected by fossil fuel infrastructure often lack the resources, access, or political power to participate meaningfully in decision-making. After passing the Virginia Environmental Justice Act in 2020, the Commonwealth took a step backward by stripping citizen air and water boards of permitting authority for polluting facilities in 2022.<sup>13</sup>

Dominion Energy is adding to these ills by planning to build six large new gas plants, including the 944-megawatt Chesterfield Energy Reliability Center (CERC).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, three interstate gas pipelines are proposed for Southside, and Dominion has recently been awarded 3 new fast-tracked gas projects for Virginia by PJM, the regional organization managing the largest U.S. power grid, of which Virginia is a part.<sup>15</sup>

These projects will extend and exacerbate the harmful consequences Virginians have endured for decades. Health costs from CERC alone are estimated at at least \$13-\$21 million annually, with \$3.3-\$4.8 million falling on Chesterfield County.<sup>16</sup> Beyond heavy health burdens, they cost nearly double clean energy alternatives.<sup>17</sup>

Non-polluting, least-cost options are essential for transitioning aging energy infrastructure to modern, resilient, and reliable electric systems. The Virginia Clean Economy Act (VCEA), a critical tool in reducing our fossil fuel dependency, covers Appalachian Power Company and Dominion Energy territories, but “merchant generators” also provide power to the regional electric grid. Although the VCEA doesn’t cover merchant generators, the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) does, making participation necessary to reduce emissions across Virginia.

## OPPORTUNITIES

Virginia can meet projected electricity demand with clean energy. Expanding projects like new power plants, pipelines, terminals, and fracking sites undermine the state’s carbon-reduction goals and environmental justice commitments.<sup>3</sup> A moratorium on new fossil fuel development would help meet climate targets while protecting communities already overburdened by pollution.

Without a moratorium, stronger safeguards are essential for protecting communities: requiring cumulative health impact assessments for new infrastructure, improving air and water quality monitoring, enforcing meaningful accountability for polluters, and re-empowering citizen boards. Equally important is ensuring authentic community participation by strengthening public notification processes and

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prioritizing the voices of those most impacted.

A well-designed, just transition can deliver high-quality, family-sustaining jobs, workforce training, and new opportunities in communities historically dependent on fossil fuels. Scaling solar, wind, and energy efficiency helps stabilize local economies, reduce emissions, and ensure that no community is left behind. Since the passage of the VCEA, clean energy jobs have grown more than three times faster than overall employment and now support over 118,000 workers statewide.<sup>18</sup>

As Virginia utilities and localities deal with the ever-increasing impact of data center development in the Commonwealth, decision-makers must reject false solutions like new methane gas plants and instead commit fully to clean energy that protects communities and meets our climate goals.

## TOP TAKEAWAYS

Fossil fuel facilities harm public health and accelerate climate change. Virginians already experience these impacts through flooding, extreme heat, and intensifying storms.

New fossil fuel infrastructure is expensive, fails to improve grid reliability, and undermines VCEA goals of achieving energy efficiency standards, limiting new carbon-emitting power plants, and retiring polluting plants for utility companies by 2045 and 2050.

A moratorium spanning generating facilities, terminals, pipeline expansions, refineries, merchant plants, and fracking sites would advance Virginia's carbon-reduction commitments.

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