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Environmental issues at forefront of concerns over pipeline

By RICHIE DAVIS

Recorder Staff

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(Left Photo) This is the approximate proposed path the pipeline will take crossing under the Deerfield River near where the power lines cross in the North Meadows of Old Deerfield. View looking west. - *Recorder/Paul Franz*

(Right Photo) The proposed path of the pipe line would take it past Ashfield Lake just to the north along the power company's right of way. - *Recorder/Paul Franz*

Fourth in a series

(EDITOR'S NOTE: In coming weeks, Tennessee Gas Pipeline Co.'s proposed Northeast Energy Direct pipeline through Franklin County will proceed through a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission process to choose which issues to include in an environmental review to begin this fall. This series explores the project from a variety of angles.)

If it's built across 35 miles of Franklin County — the proposed Northeast Energy Direct natural gas pipeline and its construction could affect a greater share of fragile landscape than in other parts of the state.

Here, at least 42 percent of the pipeline's total Massachusetts length is along environmentally sensitive regions and aquatic buffers, says a report by the University of Massachusetts Center for Agriculture, Food and the Environment. The report on the permanent effects of the project on protected open space emphasizes lands dedicated to agriculture and conservation, on primary habitat for rare species, wetlands, wildlife habitat and communities of biodiversity.

Nearly all of the proposed pipeline route in Massachusetts is in Berkshire County and eight towns in Franklin County "where a lot of those natural resources are to begin with," said principal researcher Scott Jackson.

In several of the 23 categories studied, the report showed, overlap between the route and designated resource areas was disproportionately higher for Franklin County than for the state as a whole, including priority habitat of rare species and estimated habitat of wetlands wildlife.

Berkshire and Franklin counties rank first and second in Massachusetts for intact land area designated as Critical Natural Landscape — those best able to support ecological processes and disturbances over long periods, with a wide array of species and habitats.

The proposed path would also affect a disproportionate share of “farmland of statewide importance,” “scenic landscapes” and “core habitat areas, critical for the long-term persistence of ‘species of conservation concern,’” the report finds.

“I’m sure people will find things that reinforce their sense this (pipeline) is not a good thing,” said Jackson. Where some resources would be disproportionately impacted, the data could be the basis of various groups or agencies arguing for an alternative route or mitigations imposed if the project is approved by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, he said.

As it’s refined its planned project route, TGP spokesman Allen Fore said last year, it’s tried to “co-locate” along existing utility rights of way for about 86 percent of its path in Massachusetts.

“You may have an overhead powerline ... going through a particularly sensitive area, but does it make sense to go in that same corridor, right next to the overhead powerline, rather than disturbing green field area?” he asked at a Pittsfield gathering in September.

“Certainly there will be areas where we’ll need additional clearing,” he told The Recorder a few months later. “We’re trying to limit and contain those impacts as much as possible. “

Fore told a Massachusetts Farm Bureau Federation gathering in January that once completed, farmland over the buried pipeline would be restored to its pre-construction condition.

“You can see that over time, the land is restored,” he said, pointing to photos of an existing pipeline path. “Crops can be grown over the top of the pipe, (it) actually goes through underneath this cropland here, and can be re-vegetated in areas where the pipeline is buried underground.”

Yet the path, to be covered with only 36 inches of normal soil or 24 inches of consolidated rock, would be tightly controlled by TGP and monitored, and would be kept clear of tree roots that would affect the pipeline.

According to information provided by Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, the pipeline route would cut across:

- 343 acres of protected properties in Northfield
- a 57-acre forest in Warwick
- 240 acres of protected farmland in Deerfield
- 210 acres of protected farmland in Ashfield
- 499 acres of conservation land in Conway
- 126 acres of protected land in Erving
- 3,148 acres of protected farmland and conservation land in Montague — including a 1,493-acre watershed protection area and the 1,515-acre Montague Plains Wildlife Management Area.

These are among nearly 150 protected properties around Massachusetts, nearly 75 percent of which would require a two-thirds legislative vote for release from the state Constitution’s Article 97 provision.

Even though not all those acres would be directly impacted, Mount Grace Executive Director Leigh Youngblood said having large blocks of conservation land “perforated” by a pipeline reduces its value in protecting biodiversity and reduces the “strategic investments” of public funding and landowner donations.

“One of our most important contributions to biodiversity is that we have large forest blocks,” said Youngblood. “When you have a larger block, you have more pieces of the ecosystem held together. They’re held together and have integrity.”

She added, “Article 97 was created to protect each individual investment in conservation land. You can’t just wipe it out with the stroke of a pen. Some of these parcels have been ‘permanently protected’ for 100 years.”

Many of the slopes are very steep, for example, making them susceptible to destabilization and potential erosion, or how much groundwater disruption there could be from having a conduit cut through rock beneath the soil, Youngblood said.

“These are a lot of very sensitive natural resources,” added Youngblood, who points to the lasting changes in the landscape even from pipeline construction done 30 years ago. “When you get close to the ground and you can see it, it’s much clearer than when you read the reports. “It’s not just 48 acres,” she added, speaking of a single Northfield Town Forest property that could be impacted. “How many people contributed money to permanently protect that land? All of those deserve protection.”

Some, including the Town of Deerfield and the Franklin Regional Council of Governments have called for assurances that the high-pressure pipeline can be buried well below the frost line to avoid prevent frost damage that could cause leaks.

TGP describes its proposed route — which is still subject to change over the next 15 months before FERC decides — as being about 80 percent “co-located” along existing rights of way from Wright, N.Y., to Dracut, so that less unspoiled property is disturbed.

Yet even though the “co-location” term creates the perception that the pipeline will be sited along a corridor already developed for another pipeline or transmission line, said Youngblood, the 200-foot construction path would instead be centered on the 100-foot right-of way, with the understanding that the pipeline would not be located directly under a transmission line, for safety reasons.

Youngblood explained, “You’re just widening the cleared right of way.”

Fore acknowledged that co-location means a 400-foot wide survey area centered on the power line, so that the gas line itself could be buried beneath land outside the right of way, which could necessitate removal of trees.

“Certainly, there will be areas where we’ll need additional clearing,” he said. “We’re trying to limit and contain those impacts as much as possible. We think that the co-location piece is a critical piece to this.”

At a Franklin Regional Council of Governments forum last month, consulting engineer Marco Boscardin said that because of concerns about corrosion of the coated, galvanized steel pipe, it should be laid “several hundred, if not 1,000 feet away” from the high-tension line itself.

The regional planning consultant later said his concern was not only about the possibility of the pipeline corroding — and possibly leaking — under an electrical line, but also of the impact on the high-tension line itself from a pipeline explosion, with “an impact radius” of 900 feet.

In Northfield, which would play host to not just 8.5 miles of pipeline, but also to a proposed 80,000 horsepower compressor station on part of a 242-acre site, the Selectboard has written to FERC raising a litany of concerns: gas and volatile organic compound releases, condensate liquids and PCBs, water-body crossings and wetland construction mitigation, impacts to groundwater flow and quality from runoff, spill prevention and control, odor, noise, soil compaction and displacement.

Looming over the issue, also, are much larger environmental concerns.

Pipeline critics contend that clearing forestland to build more natural-gas pipeline encourages more methane-releasing hydrofracking, as well as perpetuation of fossil-fuel burning, worsening climate change. Proponents argue that gas burns more cleanly than the coal in electric generators this pipeline will service, and will bridge the gap until renewable energy sources are more economical.

TOMORROW: How it gets decided.

You can reach Richie Davis at: rdavis@recorder.com or 413-772-0261, ext. 269