



**UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
REGION III
1650 Arch Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103-2029**

March 23, 2022

Kimberly D. Bose, Secretary
Federal Energy Regulatory Commission
888 First St., N.E., Room IA
Washington, DC 20426

Re: Virginia Reliability Project, Columbia Gas Transmission, LLC Docket No. PF22-3-000 and Commonwealth Energy Connector Project, Transcontinental Gas Pipe Line Company, LLC, Docket No. PF22-4-000; Notice of Scoping Period; Greenville, Prince George, Sussex, Surry, Southampton, Isle of Wight, Mecklenburg, Brunswick, and Greenville Counties, Virginia and in the cities of Suffolk and Chesapeake, Virginia

Dear Secretary Bose:

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the information presented in the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's (FERC) February 22, 2022, Notice of Scoping Period (Notice) requesting comments on environmental issues for the planned Virginia Reliability Project and Commonwealth Energy Connector Project involving construction and operation of facilities by Columbia Gas Transmission, LLC (Columbia) and Transcontinental Gas Pipe Line Company, LLC (Transco), respectively.

Virginia Reliability Project

Columbia is proposing to replace existing lines, modify and upgrade existing compressor stations and install new minor facilities as described: 1) Replace approximately 47.7 miles of existing, 1950s vintage 12-inch-diameter (VM-107 and VM-108) pipelines with 24-inch-diameter pipeline mostly within Columbia's existing right-of-way, in the Counties of Sussex, Surry, Southampton, and Isle of Wight, as well as the cities of Suffolk and Chesapeake, Virginia; 2) installation of one new 5,500 horsepower (HP) electric-drive compressor unit at the existing Emporia Compressor Station in Greenville County, Virginia; 3) a facility upgrade involving additional gas cooling and an increase of 2,700 HP at the existing Petersburg Compressor Station in Prince George County, Virginia; 4) expansion of the Emporia Point of Receipt in Greenville County, Virginia; RS-7423 Regulator Station in Prince George County, Virginia; and the MS-831010 Point of Delivery in the City of Chesapeake, Virginia; and 5) eight mainline valve replacements, five new launcher/receiver installations, and other minor appurtenant facilities.

According to the Notice, the Virginia Reliability Project would increase the capability of Columbia's existing pipeline facilities to provide incremental firm transportation service of

100,000 dekatherms per day (Dth/d), while increasing the reliability of Columbia's system by replacing 1950s vintage pipeline. According to Columbia, its project would meet the increasing market demand of residential, commercial, and industrial consumers in southeast Virginia.

Commonwealth Energy Connector Project

Transco is proposing to 1) construct a 6.35-mile-long, 24-inch-diameter pipeline loop (referred to as the Commonwealth Loop), including valve and launcher/receiver facilities, in Brunswick and Greensville Counties, Virginia; 2) install a 30,500 HP electric motor-drive compressor unit at the existing Compressor Station 168 in Mecklenburg County, Virginia; and 3) expand the existing Emporia Metering and Regulator Station in Greensville County, Virginia.

According to the Notice, Transco plans to expand its existing natural gas transmission system to provide 105,000 Dth/d of incremental firm transportation capacity from Compressor Station 165 in Pittsylvania County, Virginia to the existing Emporia delivery point in Greensville County, Virginia on the existing South Virginia Lateral B-Line Pipeline.

EPA appreciates the thoroughness of the project discussions in the Notice and the list of impacts already planned to be evaluated under the relevant general resource areas. With that said, EPA has the following recommendations to be considered in the development of the environmental document.

Purpose and Need/Alternatives/Mitigation

- EPA recommends the environmental document include a sufficiently broad statement of purpose and need for the proposed action to reflect FERC's authority.
- EPA recommends the project need and alternatives analysis consider whether existing and reasonably foreseeable regional infrastructure, including gas and non-gas resources, can or will serve the public convenience and necessity, factoring in energy market and policy trends, including greenhouse gases (GHG) emission reduction policies.
- EPA encourages FERC to review the application considering alternative options outside of the increase in fossil fuel related infrastructure that might also meet regional needs.

Water Resources

- In accordance with the Section 404 of the Clean Water Act, impacts to streams and wetlands should be avoided or minimized. Once a preferred alternative is identified, more detailed information will be needed to assess impacts. As part of this assessment, all aquatic resources on or immediately surrounding the site should be identified and characterized. The extent of streams and wetlands on the site should be mapped and delineated according to current regulations identifying waters of the United States, including wetlands.
- For wetlands, the environmental document should include information such as the total area of the wetland(s), vegetation type, sources of hydrology, and the area of any likely direct or indirect permanent or temporary impacts. If impacts are planned or likely, we suggest an analysis of the wetland's functions and values be included in the environmental document. For temporary impacts, a restoration plan should be developed to fully restore hydrology and appropriate native vegetation for streams and appropriate width, profile, and substrate for streams. If wetlands are to be permanently impacted,

compensation for lost or reduced functions will likely be needed. If stream resources will be impacted, EPA recommends including baseline resource characterization on the chemical, physical, and biological conditions, and functions of the streams.

- The environmental document should also outline measures to protect surface waters, including erosion and sedimentation control practices during construction and post-construction stormwater management to prevent pollutants and reduce runoff that contributes to flooding. While site-specific best management practices (BMPs) may not be known at this time, general practices (e.g. types of BMPs or monitoring) or requirements that must be met by a selected contractor could be indicated.
- EPA recommends analyzing the potential for effects to downstream reaches of impacted waterbodies, such as, but not limited to, changes to the hydrogeomorphology and impacts of sedimentation and compaction from construction activities in waters, to better determine if secondary impacts will occur. Secondary effects to these downstream resources should be avoided and minimized to the maximum extent practicable.
- Further, EPA recommends a conclusive evaluation of cumulative effects at a watershed scale (i.e. HUC 12) be provided to ensure that measures are undertaken to avoid and minimize the potential of cumulative impacts.

Biological Resources

- We recommend that the environmental document include a discussion of any potential impacts to wildlife and habitat during construction and operation of the project, including lighting, noise, vegetation and tree removal, earth moving activities, runoff/erosion, or constructed barriers.
- EPA recommends fully evaluating potential impacts on fauna from the proposed activities. Tree clearing could impact migratory and/or breeding birds, including Birds of Conservation Concern. Other species of special concern, such as bats, may also be impacted from clearing. Furthermore, disturbance could impact vernal pools, which are critical to breeding amphibians. We recommend consideration of measures to reduce potential impacts, including surveys for vernal pools, avoidance of habitat resources such as vernal pools and trees where possible, seasonal restrictions on tree felling and earth moving activities, and other appropriate best management practices to reduce the potential for adverse impacts.
- The Notice states work will be done “mostly” in Columbia’s existing right-of-way (ROW). Expanding the ROW or clearing previously unmaintained ROW may create additional edge habitat that may negatively impact forest interior dwelling species (FIDS) and can spread invasive species. EPA recommends avoiding expansion of clearing wherever possible. If additional areas must be cleared, the Study should evaluate the potential habitat impacts on FIDS and include in the environmental document the measures to be taken, if necessary, to avoid and mitigate impacts as the project moves forward.
- ROWs and forest edge areas provide opportunities for invasive species to colonize and spread. We recommend evaluating the potential for the project to spread invasive species and discuss BMPs that will be implemented.

Air Quality

- A general conformity rule analysis should be conducted according to the guidance provided by the EPA in Determining Conformity of General Federal Actions to State or Federal Implementation Plans. Under the general conformity rule, reasonably foreseeable emissions associated with all operational and construction activities, both direct and indirect, must be quantified and compared to the annual de minimis levels for those pollutants in nonattainment or maintenance for that area.
- Please consider that portions of the proposed project may be in an Ozone Transportation Region (OTR) and the general conformity thresholds for specific pollutants may be adjusted to reflect this. Below are two EPA sites that may be helpful for your analysis.
<https://www.epa.gov/air-quality-implementation-plans/nonattainment-and-ozone-transport-region-otr-sip-requirements>
<https://www.epa.gov/green-book>
- EPA recommends the implementation of best practices that reduce emissions during construction and operations, such as options that explore diesel controls, and cleaner fuel (ultra-low sulfur diesel) and construction practices for on-road and off-road equipment. This could include implementation of technologies such as diesel particulate filters, diesel oxidation catalysts, or use of contemporary, cleaner equipment, such as Tier 4 rated equipment to minimize localized impacts to nearby communities.
- Further detailed information on a broad range of cost-effective technologies and practices that improve operational efficiency and reduce emissions can be found through [EPA's Natural Gas STAR Program](#).

Climate Change

According to the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), agencies should “consider all available tools and resources in assessing GHG emissions and climate change effects of their proposed actions, including as appropriate and relevant, the 2016 GHG Guidance” (Notice of rescission of 2019 draft guidance (Feb. 19, 2021)). Based on this statement, we recommend the following be addressed in the environmental document:

- EPA recommends the environmental document estimate and analyze potential upstream and downstream GHG emissions to fully disclose the estimated direct and indirect emissions, broken out by GHG type, associated with the no action alternative and the proposed action.
- Consistent with the CEQ’s position expressed in the October 7, 2021, notice of proposed rulemaking, EPA emphasizes the importance of estimating potential upstream emissions associated with the project. CEQ states “air pollution, including greenhouse gas emissions, released by fossil fuel combustion is often a reasonably foreseeable indirect effect of proposed fossil fuel extraction that agencies should evaluate in the NEPA process, even if the pollution is remote in time or geographically remote from a proposed action”. The environmental document should consider whether the proposed project and alternatives will foreseeably induce production, or whether the supply source is known and whether the gas will come from new or existing production.

- EPA recommends FERC avoid percentage comparisons between project-level and national emissions, which inappropriately diminish the significance of project-level GHG emissions.
- EPA recommends the environmental document include a detailed discussion of the project's GHG emissions in the context of national GHG emission reduction goals over the anticipated project lifetime and address the increasing conflict over time between continued emissions and national GHG emissions reduction goals, including how the proposed project and alternatives avoid or mitigate that conflict. EPA recommends consideration of state and regional GHG reduction goals as well.
- EPA recommends utilizing the interim social cost of greenhouse gas (SC-GHG) estimates established by the Interagency Working Group on SC-GHG. Monetizing the net climate damages of GHG emissions from net changes in direct and indirect emissions provides useful information to the public and FERC decisionmakers.
- EPA recommends highlighting practicable mitigation measures to be undertaken to reduce the proposed action's GHG emissions in the environmental document and including those measures in staff recommendations for proposed terms and conditions required as part of certificate issuance, as appropriate.
- EPA recommends FERC consider ongoing and projected regional and local climate change trends and ensure robust climate resilience/adaption planning in the project design and in analyzing potential impacts to affected communities.
- EPA recommends FERC consider ongoing and projected regional and local climate change and ensure robust climate resilience/adaption planning in the project design.
- Forest degradation and loss is found to contribute to climate change. Several studies of carbon balance in the Great Dismal Swamp have occurred as forested peat wetlands store large quantities of carbon and alteration, such as loss of hydrology, may adversely impact their functions. EPA recommends evaluating the impacts on climate change from proposed tree removal and/or wetland disturbance.

Environmental Justice

- EPA recommends engaging communities with EJ concerns where regional impacts to different resource areas may occur. For example, air quality and climate change may have impacts on a broader region than the direct impacts of the proposed action. Please include EJ community outreach effort discussion in the environmental document.
- EPA recommends the environmental document consider and disclose impacts to communities with EJ concerns from this project considering impacts from past, present, and reasonably foreseeable planned actions. EPA also recommends FERC consider whether communities may already be experiencing existing pollution and social/health burdens and how the proposed action may potentially result in disproportionate impacts in that context.
- We recommend utilizing support tools such as the EPA's Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool (EJSCREEN, available at <https://ejscreen.epa.gov/mapper/>) to consider possible impacts related to the proposed project on vulnerable adjacent communities.

Tribal and Historic Concerns

- EPA recommends meaningful government to government consultation with indigenous populations. We note that Virginia's federally recognized tribes have expressed interest in projects located in the vicinity of the historic extent of the Great Dismal Swamp (which extends beyond the footprint of the national refuge).
- There may be archeological or cultural significant resources within the proposed project area. When working near or within the historic extent of Great Dismal Swamp, we recommend consulting with archeologists that are familiar with survey techniques that are specific to the Great Dismal Swamp and the history of the area.

Cumulative Impacts

- EPA encourages FERC to engage in regional master planning for energy needs. Some impacts may be compounded by other FERC approved projects at a regional scale. Beyond project need and alternatives, EPA recommends FERC disclose and consider as part of the cumulative impact analysis whether and how other recently approved projects, concurrently proposed projects, or reasonably foreseeable future planned actions may contribute to potential significant impacts, including positive outcomes.
- EPA is aware of two proposed projects that appear to be close to or within the Virginia Reliability Project study area: Bowers Hill Interchange Improvement Study (Federal Highway Administration) and the Southeastern Public Service Authority (SPSA) Regional Landfill Expansion (US Army Corps of Engineers, Norfolk District). EPA recommends consulting the lead agencies on these projects to evaluate timing and potential indirect and cumulative impacts. Further, we recommend coordination with these agencies to evaluate opportunities for improvements and impact reduction, such as the potential relocation of the gas line that bisects the SPSA Regional Landfill. Please provide findings and potential mitigation measures in the environmental document.

General

- Please provide justification or supporting data for determinations made in the environmental document, either in line with the text of the document, in a footnote, or in an appendix to make to clear how determinations are made.
- For your project planning purposes, the following resources may be helpful:
 - EnviroMapper: <https://www.epa.gov/waterdata/waters-watershed-assessment-tracking-environmental-results-system>
 - Envirofacts: <https://www3.epa.gov/enviro/>
 - 303(d) Listed Impaired Waters: <https://www.epa.gov/exposure-assessment-models/303d-listed-impaired-waters>
 - Watershed Resource Registry: <https://watershedresourcesregistry.org/states/virginia.html>

Thank you for the opportunity to provide NEPA scoping comments for the Project. We believe the issues identified above can be fully addressed in the NEPA process, and we are willing to work with your agency to develop a strategy to achieve that goal. Please feel free to contact Joy Gillespie (215) 814-2793 with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Stepan Nevshehirlian
Environmental Assessment Branch Chief
Office of Communities, Tribes and
Environmental Assessment