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NO
perfect route

“Don’t compare me to the Almighty,” said President Obama when he was running for his second term. “Compare me to the alternative.” The point — which other candidates and strategists often have echoed — is plain: The public doesn’t get to choose between perfection and imperfection. It must choose between two imperfect options, one of which is better than the other.

This point seems to have been largely overlooked in the discussion of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, especially by some of the ACP’s most vocal critics: environmentalists and landowners along the pipeline’s path through Virginia.

Start with the biggest question about the ACP: Do we need it? The short answer is yes. As a long piece about the pipeline in *The Washington Post* magazine recently noted, the Obama administration’s Clean Power Plan “would essentially regulate coal-fired power plants out of existence, replacing them with gas-powered facilities. The goal is a dramatic overhaul of America’s energy grid and a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.”

Bob Burnley, a former head of Virginia’s Department of Environmental Quality, told the newspaper: “I grew up professionally with big, nasty coal-fired power plants. This (the Atlantic Coast Pipeline) is a huge step in the right direction. Replacing (coal) with gas is the only thing that makes sense right now.”

It’s pretty to think the U.S. could replace all that coal-fired generation with renewable energy, but it’s not realistic. For one thing, wind and solar power are intermittent. This means they need a dependable backup source so the lights don’t go out whenever the weather changes. Advances in distributed generation and energy storage might one day obviate that need — but power companies have to make plans using currently available

Another tweak, this time to avoid wetlands, moved the route even closer to Yogaville. The community’s Swami Dayananda called the moves “unconscionable.”

When federal forestry officials objected to a route over mountains that they said would affect the federally protected Cow Knob Salamander, Dominion proposed drilling through

any time the pipeline path was moved, it solved one problem but created another.

the mountains. A pipeline opponent worried that would pollute streams.

One of the routes runs past the entrance to the Wintergreen resort. So a group called Friends of Wintergreen drafted their own alternative to that alternative — but that caused problems, too:

“Preston Lauterbach, a historian who lives south

of Route 664 ... said the Friends of Wintergreen route would cut through his property and others in a historically African-American community founded by freed slaves.”

A spokesman for Friends of Wintergreen said the group’s plan was merely notional: “There was no intent or desire of any kind to go through sacred ground like that.”



Opponents say all this could be avoided if only Dominion would “co-locate” the pipeline along existing utility routes, or next to highways.

While co-location is feasible in spots, it’s prohibitively difficult in others, for a variety of engineering reasons.

Nor is it likely that pipeline opponents would be assuaged by the idea of having compressed natural gas in close proximity to either high-voltage electricity or heavily traveled roadways. Indeed, activists in other states have warned about the supposed dangers of co-location.

Even when Dominion does what opponents want, they aren’t happy. The Post story reports that when the company rerouted the pipeline’s path off Nelson resident Heidi Cochran’s property, “Cochran dismissed it as a ruse. ‘I still think they want us to drop our guard and have division,’ she said.”

Understandable? Perhaps. But rational? Not in the least.

Either America is going to wean itself off coal or not. If it does, then it will need more natural gas. And if it uses more natural gas, then the pipelines have to go somewhere. Virginia is never going to find the perfect route for the ACP — but sooner or later, it has to settle on one.

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A second problem with renewables is acreage. Dominion's new natural-gas plant in Warren County can generate more than 1,300 megawatts on a slab of land that's only 39 acres. By way of comparison, the National Mall in Washington covers 146 acres. Generating the same power from sunlight would require a field of solar panels covering 36,000 acres, or 56 square miles. All of Washington is 68 square miles.

Another option — perhaps the best with regard to climate change — would be to ramp up nuclear power generation. And Dominion is pursuing a license for a third reactor at its North Anna station. But environmentalists don't like that, either. And even if they did, nuclear power requires an extremely long runway to get off the ground. Dominion started working on plans for a third North Anna reactor in 2001.

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So the alternatives are: Continue to burn coal and belch greenhouse gases until the coal runs out. Or replace coal with natural gas. Or build nuclear plants as fast as possible — and use more natural gas in the interim. Or build renewable generation with gas-fired backup — and use more natural gas.

The second, third, and fourth options mean new pipelines. And the pipelines have to go somewhere. Dominion has been

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