Major gas pipeline project OK'd

$3.2 billion Sabal Trail will supply FPL and Duke power plants

By Christopher Curry, GateHouse Florida
Federal regulators have approved the controversial Sabal Trail natural gas pipeline project, which will cut through conservation areas, under rivers and near springs in north central Florida.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission has issued a certificate of public convenience and necessity for the $3.2 billion, 516-mile, three-foot-wide pipeline that will carry up to 1 billion cubic feet of natural gas a day from Alabama through south Georgia and a dozen Florida counties, including Alachua, Gilchrist, Suwannee, Levy and Marion, to a connector pipeline in Osceola County.

The pipeline will supply natural gas for a Florida Power & Light electric generation and a Duke Energy plant in Citrus County.

The pipeline is a joint venture between FPL parent company NextEra, Duke and Spectra Energy, the Houston-based company that will build and operate it.

Spectra Energy said construction was expected to start in May or June, with the pipeline in operation by May 1, 2017.

The opposition

A contingent of environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, the Gulf Restoration Network, Our Santa Fe River and the south-Georgia based WWALS Watershed Coalition, organized to oppose the pipeline.

They have cited environmental concerns because the pipeline route is expected to cut across wetlands, conservation areas, sinkhole-prone terrain, high aquifer recharge areas and under the Lower Santa Fe and Suwannee rivers.

They’ve also argued the pipeline is not needed, and Florida should rely more on solar-generated energy.

John. S Quarterman, president of the WWALS Watershed Coalition, which fought an unsuccessful legal battle against a Florida Department of Environmental Protection permit for the pipeline, said the FERC permit will not end the fight.

“In fact, the opposition is increasing . . . the number of groups and individuals is growing,” he said.

Quarterman noted that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has not issued a permit allowing for construction through wetlands. Quarterman also said an environmental group with more financial resources than WWALS — he declined to provide the name — may also mount a legal fight against the FERC permit.

A 'balanced plan'

Spectra Energy officials said the FERC decision was based on comprehensive review.

“Sabal Trail has been evaluating proposed routes, design and construction methods and potential impacts on community members and the environment since June 2013,” Spectra spokeswoman Andrea Grover wrote in a statement.

“Over this 2½ years of discussions, surveys, studies, permitting and planning, Sabal Trail feels it has developed a balanced plan for the route, construction techniques and measures to avoid, minimize or mitigate impacts. We believe that FERC has performed a very comprehensive evaluation of alternative routing, impacts involving karst, surface water and groundwater aquifers, protected species habitat and properties crossed by the pipeline, and has proposed reasonable conditions to mitigate those impacts.

“FERC has responded to concerns raised by stakeholders and feels it will not have a significant adverse effect on local communities,” Glover said.

The EPA weighs in

While environmental groups raised concerns and organized in opposition, the pipeline project blew through the government review process with primarily positive feedback. That changed in late October, when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency expressed “very significant concerns” over the way FERC was moving closer to approving the project. The EPA raised issues with FERC appearing to be favoring a route that was moving toward approval because it was, with few changes, the same route included in a 2013 contract between Spectra Energy and FPL.

“The proposed pipeline is expected to have potentially significant environmental issues related to drinking water supplies (the Floridan aquifer), sensitive geologic formations (karst), wetlands, conservation areas, environmental justice (EJ) communities, and air quality and greenhouse gas emissions,” the EPA’s letter said.

The EPA also questioned the assertion that hundreds of acres of wetlands impacted by construction would, over time, return to their natural state.

But in December, the EPA reversed course and dropped its concerns.
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