The Army Corps of Engineers last week finalized permits that allow the companies partnering on the pipeline to discharge dredged and fill material into water bodies, such as wetlands, during construction.

By Cindy Swirko

A lawsuit to try to halt the mammoth Sabal Trail natural gas pipeline that will pass through North Central Florida was filed Wednesday by three environmental groups.

The suit was filed in the U.S. 11th Circuit Court in Atlanta against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which issued three permits under the federal Clean Water Act to allow construction of the 515-mile group of connected pipelines in the Sabal Trail project.

The Gulf Restoration Network, the Sierra Club and Flint Riverkeeper filed the lawsuit.

“At this point this was the option that made the most sense, the one that we felt was the strongest place we could stand,” said Merrillee Malwitz-Jipson of the Sierra Club and Our Santa Fe River. “And because we have support of two other groups, we felt that this is where we needed to be. After everywhere we’ve been...
in the past three years and every road we’ve been down to stop this, this is where we ended up.”

The Army Corps of Engineers last week finalized permits that allow the companies partnering on the pipeline — Houston-based Spectra Energy, Duke Energy and FP&L parent company NextEra Energy — to discharge dredged and fill material into water bodies, such as wetlands, during construction.

The permit requires the Sabal Trail partnership to buy credits from several federal- and state-approved wetlands mitigation banks. Those banks are wetland areas that have been preserved or restored on the premise that they offset the impact to wetlands from Army Corps of Engineers-permitted construction projects.

Last fall, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimated some 1,200 acres would be destroyed or impacted during construction. The EPA later reduced that projection to less than 900 acres, but later made a 180-degree turn and dropped significant environmental concerns over the project — including whether the potential for sinkholes and aquifer damage had been downplayed by Sabal Trail and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

The project stretches from Alabama to Florida.

In Florida, it will run through rural and wooded areas of Hamilton, Suwannee, Gilchrist, Levy and Marion counties as well as a small piece of Alachua County.

The pipeline will continue through Sumter, Lake and Orange counties to hook up to the pipeline that will run from Osceola County to the FPL natural gas power plant in Martin County. Another smaller pipeline that is part of the larger project will supply a Duke Energy natural gas plant in Citrus County.

Environmental groups contend the pipeline will move gas drilled through fracking over an area that provides drinking water to approximately 10 million people. They believe construction poses a threat through the possible release of hazardous materials and drilling mud into the aquifer.