

Virginia

Dominion to pause cuts after felling thousands of trees on W&OD Trail

The energy company says the cuts were necessary to prevent it from falling out of compliance with national standards and to prevent power outages.

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By [Michael Brice-Saddler](#)

An effort by Dominion Energy to cut down a four-mile swath of thousands of trees along a stretch of the historic Washington and Old Dominion Trail has alarmed Northern Virginia officials, who recently asked the energy company to pause the cuts and return to its usual practice of only pruning and removing trees that pose a clear risk to transmission lines that tower above.

The 45-mile-long, 100-foot-wide W&OD Trail stretches from Shirlington to Purcellville; but Dominion has an easement on a 33-mile portion of the trail that allows it to maintain control of the transmission lines. Most years, that work includes regular trimming and pruning to prevent interference, said Paul Gilbert, executive director of the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority, better known as NOVA Parks.

But officials in Northern Virginia and frequent users of the trail say they were stunned in November when Dominion, as part of an effort to restring power lines along a four-mile stretch of the trail in Fairfax, from Vienna to Dunn Loring, included the complete removal of thousands of trees that spanned the entire 100-foot-wide boundary.

Officials say this culling of trees is much more aggressive than Dominion’s usual maintenance on the W&OD Trail, which includes only cutting and pruning trees that threaten its power lines. They also say there was little warning offered to the surrounding community about the extent of Dominion’s work: An Oct. 24 notice from Dominion sent to some Fairfax residents about the four-mile power line project, reviewed by The Washington Post, discusses the removal of “some shrubs and trees.”

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(The Washington Post)

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“They did not indicate in any way that they were going to take out literally every tree, from one edge of the property to the other,” Gilbert said of Dominion’s work. “There’s a few little scraggly trees here or there left, but 99 percent of them have been removed in this area.”

East Falls Church resident Michael Bevan said the affected area of the trail is in plan view of his usual bike path. But over the course of weeks, Bevan said he observed the removal of trees “that had nothing to do with power lines” — a change from previous years.

“They took all the trees down; trees that could never touch a power line unless a tornado took them up,” Bevan said. “I’m not sure what the issue is. The whole thing is unbelievably draconian.”

Dominion, which has indefinitely paused work along the trail, says the expansive cuts were necessary to prevent the company from falling out of compliance with national standards and to prevent power outages — though it acknowledged a need for more robust outreach to affected communities along the trail.

In a statement, Dominion spokesperson Aisha Khan said vegetation management along the W&OD Trail is “essential to maintaining the safety and reliability of the power grid,” adding that the company must adhere to national vegetation management standards to prevent service disruptions and avoid penalties. “It has been 20 years since significant forestry maintenance was conducted in this corridor, and the overgrowth now poses a risk to grid reliability,” Khan said.

After the tree-cutting in Fairfax began, Gilbert said that NOVA Parks learned of Dominion’s plans to perform significant work along the remainder of the 33-mile stretch containing its power lines. Dominion’s easement allows the energy company to manage surrounding vegetation, and NOVA Parks believed the company would potentially cut tens of thousands of trees across 400 acres.

Last week, in consultation with NOVA Parks, several Northern Virginia jurisdictions including the Fairfax and Loudoun County boards of supervisors and the Arlington County Board unanimously passed resolutions urging Dominion to pause its work on the rest of the trail.

In Fairfax, the resolution introduced by County Supervisor Walter L. Alcorn, whose jurisdiction includes the already-affected four-mile stretch, says Dominion “has expressed their intention to cut almost all the trees on the entire 33 miles of the park with transmission lines.” It calls on the energy company to return to “selective pruning.”

The resolution also says that Dominion has indicated that trees and vegetation with the potential to grow over 10 feet would not be permitted in this section of the trail, though Dominion clarified that this height limit is aimed at trees growing directly beneath the power lines.

“Everyone recognizes the need to protect the power lines. But the way they were doing it was unacceptable,” Alcorn said in an interview Monday. “This is a very important corridor providing continuous green across dozens of miles. I would hope Dominion, going forward, will go the extra mile to work with neighbors and those affected.”

At an Arlington County Board meeting last week, while voicing support for the resolution there, several members raised alarm and confusion over the extent of tree-cutting that had been done on the four-mile stretch. “I can only scratch my head,” said County Board Chair Takis P. Karatonis. “It’s going in with a bulldozer instead of scalpel.”

In the statement, Khan said “Dominion Energy has maintained communication with NOVA Parks, Fairfax County, the Town of Vienna, and state legislative offices” regarding its vegetation management efforts.

For nearly two decades, NOVA Parks and Dominion operated under a voluntary memorandum of understanding that instructed a more collaborative approach with the authority to manage trees and other vegetation. Dominion officially terminated the MOU, which was established in 2005, in November — around the same time the tree cuts in Fairfax began. Khan said the MOU no longer reflects Dominion’s need to “ensure safe and reliable electric transmission.”

Khan said that once Dominion’s work on the Fairfax reconductor effort is complete in the coming weeks, Dominion will pause planned work on the W&OD Trail to “conduct a detailed, span-by-span review of the remaining corridor to identify trees that need removal.” While the statement did not specify the length of the pause, it is expected to last several months.

Once the review is complete, Khan said, Dominion will coordinate with NOVA Parks and other stakeholders to refine their outreach strategy. Regarding the MOU, Khan said that Dominion has no plans to establish a new one. “However, we remain committed to working with NOVA Parks to support the trail’s natural habitat while preserving low-growing native species.”

In January and February, Dominion and NOVA Parks discussed ways to mitigate the tree clearings, including planting grasses and wildflowers along the trail that support pollinating animals to promote growth. Gilbert and other officials are skeptical about whether these efforts will include the replanting of trees. Dominion says all options are on the table as the company works on a plan.

Gilbert said that NOVA Parks will also come up with a plan, in consultation with governments in Northern Virginia.

“We’ll present that to Dominion — and that will include a robust restoration of the area that has been damaged, and protocol for how to move forward with other cutting that needs to be done in the future,” Gilbert said. “It needs to be very different from how they have acted in the past, with lots of coordination, evaluation of resources, and restoration after work has been done.”



