

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FEDERAL ENERGY REGULATORY COMMISSION

Dominion Energy Transmission, Inc.

Docket No. CP19-26-000

(Issued December 19, 2019)

GLICK, Commissioner, *dissenting in part*:

1. I dissent in part from today's order because it violates both the Natural Gas Act¹ (NGA) and the National Environmental Policy Act² (NEPA). The Commission once again refuses to consider the consequences its actions have for climate change. Although neither the NGA nor NEPA permit the Commission to assume away the climate change implications of constructing and operating this project, that is precisely what the Commission is doing here.

2. In today's order authorizing Dominion Energy Transmission Inc.'s (DETI) proposed West Loop Project (Project), the Commission continues to treat greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and climate change differently than all other environmental impacts. The Commission again refuses to consider whether the Project's contribution to climate change from GHG emissions would be significant, even though it quantifies the direct GHG emissions from the Project's construction, operation³ as well as the indirect GHG emissions from the downstream consumption of natural gas.⁴ The refusal to assess the significance of the Project's contribution to the harm caused by climate change is what allows the Commission to state that approval of the Project "would not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment"⁵ and, as a result, conclude that the Project is in the public interest and required by the public convenience and necessity.⁶ Claiming that a project has no significant environmental

¹ 15 U.S.C. § 717f (2018).

² National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 *et seq.*

³ West Loop Project Environmental Assessment at Tables 10–11 (EA).

⁴ *Id.* at 48.

⁵ *Dominion Energy Transmission, Inc.*, 169 FERC ¶ 61,229, at P 24 (2019) (Certificate Order); EA at 52.

⁶ Certificate Order, 169 FERC ¶ 61,229 at P 15.

impacts while at the same time refusing to assess the significance of the project's impact on the most important environmental issue of our time is not reasoned decisionmaking.

I. The Commission's Public Interest Determination Is Not the Product of Reasoned Decisionmaking

3. We know with certainty what causes climate change: It is the result of GHG emissions, including carbon dioxide and methane, released in large quantities through the production, transportation, and the consumption of fossil fuels, including natural gas. The Commission recognizes this relationship, finding, as it must, that climate change is "driven by accumulation of GHG in the atmosphere through combustion of fossil fuels"⁷ and that emissions from the Project's construction and operation, in combination with emissions from other sources, would "contribute incrementally to future climate change impacts."⁸ In light of this undisputed relationship between anthropogenic GHG emissions and climate change, the Commission must carefully consider the Project's contribution to climate change, both in order to fulfill NEPA's requirements and to determine whether the Project is in the public interest and required by the public convenience and necessity.⁹

⁷ EA at 47. It is worth noting that the Commission used to acknowledge the combustion of fossil fuels as the primary cause behind the accumulation of GHGs in the atmosphere, see, for example, Environmental Assessment, Docket No. CP18-332-000, at 11 (2018) (South Mainline Expansion Project—the Commission's most recent NGA section 7 order), but, for reasons that are not explained, appears to have backed off that conclusion in the EA.

⁸ EA at 48.

⁹ Section 7 of the NGA requires that, before issuing a certificate for new pipeline construction, the Commission must find both a need for the pipeline and that, on balance, the pipeline's benefits outweigh its harms. 15 U.S.C. § 717f. Furthermore, NEPA requires the Commission to take a "hard look" at the environmental impacts of its decisions. See 42 U.S.C. § 4332(2)(C)(iii); *Balt. Gas & Elec. Co. v. Nat. Res. Def. Council, Inc.*, 462 U.S. 87, 97 (1983). This means that the Commission must consider and discuss the significance of the harm from a pipeline's contribution to climate change by actually evaluating the magnitude of the pipeline's environmental impact. Doing so enables the Commission to compare the environment before and after the proposed federal action and factor the changes into its decisionmaking process. See *Sierra Club v. FERC*, 867 F.3d 1357, 1374 (D.C. Cir. 2017) (*Sabal Trail*) ("The [FEIS] needed to include a discussion of the 'significance' of this indirect effect."); 40 C.F.R. § 1502.16 (a)–(b) (An agency's environmental review must "include the environmental impacts of the alternatives including the proposed action," as well as a discussion of direct and

4. Today's order falls short of that standard. As part of its public interest determination, the Commission must examine the Project's impact on the environment and public safety, which includes the facility's impact on climate change.¹⁰ That is now clearly established D.C. Circuit precedent.¹¹ The Commission, however, insists that it need not consider whether the Project's contribution to climate change is significant because there is "universally accepted methodology to attribute discrete, quantifiable, physical effects on the environment to the Project's incremental contribution to GHGs or to the end-use combustion of the natural gas supplied by the Project."¹² However, the most troubling part of the Commission's rationale is what comes next. Based on this alleged inability to assess significance, the Commission concludes that the Project will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment.¹³ Think about that. The Commission is saying out of one side of its mouth that it need not assess the significance of the Project's impact on climate change while, out of the other side of its mouth, assuring us that all environmental impacts are insignificant. That is ludicrous, unreasoned, and an abdication of our responsibility to give climate change the "hard look" that the law demands.¹⁴

indirect effects *and their significance*. (emphasis added)).

¹⁰ See *Sabal Trail*, 867 F.3d at 1373 (explaining that the Commission must consider a pipeline's direct and indirect GHG emissions because the Commission may "deny a pipeline certificate on the ground that the pipeline would be too harmful to the environment"); see also *Atl. Ref. Co. v. Pub. Serv. Comm'n of N.Y.*, 360 U.S. 378, 391 (1959) (holding that the NGA requires the Commission to consider "all factors bearing on the public interest").

¹¹ See *Allegheny Def. Project v. FERC*, 932 F.3d 940, 945-46 (D.C. Cir. 2019), *reh'g en banc granted, judgment vacated*, 2019 WL 6605464 (D.C. Cir. Dec. 5, 2019); *Birckhead v. FERC*, 925 F.3d 510, 518-19 (D.C. Cir. 2019); *Sabal Trail*, 867 F.3d at 1371-72.

¹² See EA at 49 (The Commission states that "[a]bsent such a method for relating GHG emissions to specific resource impacts, we are not able to assess potential GHG-related impacts attributable to this Project." As a result, the Commission states "we are unable to determine the significance of the Project's contribution to climate change.").

¹³ See Certificate Order, 169 FERC ¶ 61,229 at P 24 (stating that "approval of this proposal would not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment"); EA at 52.

¹⁴ *E.g.*, *Myersville Citizens for a Rural Cmty., Inc. v. FERC*, 783 F.3d 1301, 1322 (D.C. Cir. 2015) ("[A]gencies cannot overlook a single environmental consequence if it

5. It also means that the volume of emissions caused by the Project does not play a meaningful role in the Commission's public interest determination, no matter how many times the Commission assures us otherwise. Using the approach in today's order, the Commission will always be able to conclude that a project will not have any significant environmental impact irrespective of the project's actual GHG emissions or those emissions' impact on climate change. So long as that is the case, a project's impact on climate change cannot, as a logical matter, play a meaningful role in the Commission's public interest determination. A public interest determination that systematically excludes the most important environmental consideration of our time is contrary to law, arbitrary and capricious, and not the product of reasoned decisionmaking.

II. The Commission's NEPA Analysis of the Project's Contribution to Climate Change Is Deficient

6. The Commission's NEPA analysis is similarly flawed. In order to evaluate the environmental consequences of the Project under NEPA, the Commission must consider the harm caused by the Project's GHG emissions and "evaluate the 'incremental impact' that these emissions will have on climate change or the environment more generally."¹⁵ Today's order quantifies the GHG emissions caused by the Project's operation and construction as well as the GHG emissions caused by the downstream consumption of natural gas the South Field Energy power plant.¹⁶ Although quantifying

is even "arguably significant."); see *Michigan v. EPA*, 135 S. Ct. 2699, 2706 (2015) ("Not only must an agency's decreed result be within the scope of its lawful authority, but the process by which it reaches that result must be logical and rational." (internal quotation marks omitted)); see also *Motor Vehicle Mfrs. Ass'n, Inc. v. State Farm Mut. Auto. Ins. Co.*, 463 U.S. 29, 43 (1983) (explaining that agency action is "arbitrary and capricious if the agency has . . . entirely failed to consider an important aspect of the problem, [or] offered an explanation for its decision that runs counter to the evidence before the agency").

¹⁵ *Ctr. for Biological Diversity v. Nat'l Highway Traffic Safety Admin.*, 538 F.3d 1172, 1216 (9th Cir. 2008); *WildEarth Guardians v. Zinke*, 368 F. Supp. 3d 41, 51 (D.D.C. 2019) (explaining that the agency was required to "provide the information necessary for the public and agency decisionmakers to understand the degree to which [its] decisions at issue would contribute" to the "impacts of climate change in the state, the region, and across the country").

¹⁶ EA at 48 ("The Project can deliver up to 150,000 dekatherms per day of new volumes of natural gas, which if combusted at the facility above, would produce 2.9 million metric tons of CO₂ per year.").

the Project's GHG emissions is a necessary step toward meeting the Commission's NEPA obligations, simply reporting the volume of emissions is insufficient.¹⁷

7. In *Sabal Trail*, the court explained that the Commission was required "to include a discussion of the 'significance' of" the indirect effects of the Project, including its GHG emissions.¹⁸ That makes sense. Identifying and evaluating the consequences that the Project's GHG emissions may have for climate change is essential if NEPA is to play the disclosure and good government roles for which it was designed.¹⁹ But neither today's order nor the accompanying EA provide even attempt to assess the significance of the Project's GHG emissions or how they contribute to climate change. It is hard to see how hiding the ball by refusing to assess the significance of the Project's climate impacts is consistent with either of those purposes.

8. In addition, under NEPA, a finding of significance informs the Commission's inquiry into potential ways of mitigating environmental impacts.²⁰ An environmental review document must "contain a detailed discussion of possible mitigation measures" to address adverse environmental impacts.²¹ "Without such a discussion, neither the agency

¹⁷ See *Ctr. for Biological Diversity*, 538 F.3d at 1216 ("While the [environmental document] quantifies the expected amount of CO2 emitted . . . , it does not evaluate the 'incremental impact' that these emissions will have on climate change or on the environment more generally"); *Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Ctr. v. Bureau of Land Mgmt.*, 387 F.3d 989, 995 (9th Cir. 2004) ("A calculation of the total number of acres to be harvested in the watershed is a necessary component . . . , but it is not a sufficient description of the actual environmental effects that can be expected from logging those acres.").

¹⁸ *Sabal Trail*, 867 F.3d at 1374.

¹⁹ See, e.g., *Robertson v. Methow Valley Citizens Council*, 490 U.S. 332, 349 (1989) (explaining that one of NEPA's purposes is to ensure that "relevant information will be made available to the larger audience that may also play a role in both the decisionmaking process and the implementation of that decision"); *Lemon v. Geren*, 514 F.3d 1312, 1315 (D.C. Cir. 2008) ("The idea behind NEPA is that if the agency's eyes are open to the environmental consequences of its actions and if it considers options that entail less environmental damage, it may be persuaded to alter what it proposed.").

²⁰ 40 C.F.R. § 1502.16 (2018) (NEPA requires an implementing agency to form a "scientific and analytic basis for the comparisons" of the environmental consequences of its action in its environmental review, which "shall include discussions of . . . [d]irect effects and their significance.").

²¹ *Robertson*, 490 U.S. at 351

nor other interested groups and individuals can properly evaluate the severity of the adverse effects” of a project, making an examination of possible mitigation measures necessary to ensure that the agency has taken a “hard look” at the environmental consequences of the action at issue.²²

9. Instead, the Commission insists that it need not assess the significance of the Project’s GHG emissions because it lacks a “universally accepted methodology” to “attribute discrete, quantifiable, physical effects on the environment to the Project’s incremental contribution to GHGs or to the end-use combustion of the natural gas supplied by the Project.”²³ But that does not excuse the Commission’s failure to evaluate these emissions. As an initial matter, the lack of a single methodology does not prevent the Commission from adopting *a* methodology, even if that methodology is not universally accepted. The Commission has several tools to assess the harm from the Project’s contribution to climate change, including, for example, the Social Cost of Carbon. By measuring the long-term damage done by a ton of carbon dioxide, the Social Cost of Carbon links GHG emissions to actual environmental effects from climate change, thereby facilitating the necessary “hard look” at the Project’s environmental impacts that NEPA requires. Especially when it comes to a global problem like climate change, a measure for translating a single project’s climate change impacts into concrete and comprehensible terms plays a useful role in the NEPA process by putting the harms from climate change in terms that are readily accessible for both agency decisionmakers and the public at large. The Commission, however, continues to ignore the tools at its disposal, relying on deeply flawed reasoning that I have previously critiqued at length.²⁴

²² *Id.* at 352. The discussion of mitigation is especially critical under today’s circumstances where the Commission prepared an EA instead of an Environmental Impact Statement to satisfy its NEPA obligations. The EA relies on the fact that certain environmental impacts will be mitigated in order to ultimately find that the Project “would not . . . significantly affect[] the quality of the human environment.” EA at 52. Absent these mitigation requirements, the Project’s environmental impacts would require the Commission to develop an Environmental Impact Statement—a much more extensive undertaking. *See Sierra Club v. Peterson*, 717 F.2d 1409, 1415 (D.C. Cir. 1983) (“If *any* ‘significant’ environmental impacts might result from the proposed agency action then an [Environmental Impact Statement] must be prepared *before* the action is taken.”).

²³ EA at 49.

²⁴ *See, e.g., Transcontinental Gas Pipe Line Co., LLC*, 167 FERC ¶ 61,110 (2019) (Glick, Comm’r, dissenting in part at P 6 & n.11) (noting that the Social Cost of Carbon “gives both the Commission and the public a means to translate a discrete project’s

10. Regardless of tools or methodologies available, the Commission also can use its expertise to consider all factors and determine, quantitatively or qualitatively, whether the Project's GHG emissions have a significant impact on climate change. That is precisely what the Commission does in other aspects of its environmental review. Consider, for example, the Commission's findings that the Project will not have a significant effect on issues as diverse as "soils,"²⁵ "groundwater resources,"²⁶ and "wetland resources"²⁷ Notwithstanding the lack of any "universally accepted methodology" to assess these impacts, the Commission managed to use its judgment to conduct a qualitative review, and assess the significance of the Project's effect on those considerations. The Commission's refusal to, at the very least, exercise similar qualitative judgment to assess the significance of GHG emissions here is arbitrary and capricious.²⁸

11. That refusal is even more mystifying because NEPA "does not dictate particular decisional outcomes."²⁹ NEPA "'merely prohibits uninformed—rather than unwise—agency action.'"³⁰ In other words, taking the matter seriously—and rigorously examining a project's impacts on climate change—does not necessarily prevent any Commissioner from ultimately concluding that a project meets the public interest standard.

12. Even if the Commission were to determine that a project's GHG emissions are significant, that would not be the end of the inquiry nor would it mean that the project is not in the public interest or required by the public convenience and necessity. Instead,

climate impacts into concrete and comprehensible terms"); *Fla. Se. Connection, LLC*, 164 FERC ¶ 61,099 (2018) (Glick, Comm'r, dissenting).

²⁵ EA at 10.

²⁶ *Id.* at 12.

²⁷ *Id.* at 15.

²⁸ After all, the standard the Commission typically uses for evaluating significance is whether the adverse impact would result in a substantial adverse change in the physical environment. *See e.g.* Adelpia Gateway Project Environmental Assessment, Docket No. CP18-46-000 at 33 (Jan 1, 2019). Surely that standard is open to some subjective interpretation by each Commissioner. What today's order does not explain is why it is appropriate to exercise subjective interpretation and judgment when it comes to impacts such as groundwater resources and soils, but not climate change.

²⁹ *Sierra Club v. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers*, 803 F.3d 31, 37 (D.C. Cir. 2015).

³⁰ *Id.* (quoting *Robertson*, 490 U.S. at 351).

the Commission could require mitigation—as the Commission often does with regard to other environmental impacts. The Supreme Court has held that, when a project may cause potentially significant environmental impacts, the relevant environmental impact statement must “contain a detailed discussion of possible mitigation measures” to address adverse environmental impacts.³¹ The Court explained that, “[w]ithout such a discussion, neither the agency nor other interested groups and individuals can properly evaluate the severity of the adverse effects” of a project, making an examination of possible mitigation measures necessary to ensure that the agency has taken a “hard look” at the environmental consequences of the action at issue.³² The Commission not only has the obligation to discuss mitigation of adverse environmental impacts under NEPA, but also the authority to condition certificates under section 7 of the NGA,³³ which could encompass measures to mitigate a project’s GHG emissions.

13. Furthermore, a rigorous examination and determination of significance regarding climate change impacts would bolster any finding of public interest by providing the Commission a more complete set of information necessary to weigh benefits against adverse effects. By refusing to assess significance, however, the Commission short circuits any discussion of mitigation measures for the Project’s GHG emissions, eliminating a potential pathway for us to achieve consensus on whether the Project is consistent with the public interest.

* * *

14. Today’s order is not the product of reasoned decisionmaking. Its analysis of the Project’s contribution to climate change is shoddy and its conclusion that the Project will not have any significant environmental impacts is illogical. After all, the Commission itself acknowledges that the Project will contribute to climate change, but refuses to consider whether that contribution might be significant before proclaiming that the Project will have no significant environmental impacts. So long as that is the case, the record simply cannot support the Commission’s conclusion that there will be no significant environmental impacts. Simply put, the Commission’s analysis of the

³¹ *Robertson*, 490 U.S. at 351.

³² *Id.* at 352; *see also* 40 C.F.R. §§ 1508.20 (defining mitigation), 1508.25 (including in the scope of an environmental impact statement mitigation measures).

³³ 15 U.S.C. § 717f(e); Certificate Order, 169 FERC ¶ 61,133 at P 57 (“[T]he Commission has the authority to take whatever steps are necessary to ensure the protection of environmental resources . . . , including authority to impose any additional measures deemed necessary . . .”).

Project's consequences for climate change does not represent the "hard look" that the law requires.

For these reasons, I respectfully dissent in part.

Richard Glick
Commissioner