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Reforestation slowly takes root in pipeline pathway through Highlands park

MONDAY, AUGUST 20, 2012 LAST UPDATED: TUESDAY AUGUST 21, 2012, 1:37 PM

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THE RECORD



Photos: A look at Wawayanda State Park

A 150-foot-wide clearing through once-pristine Wawayanda State Park is now mostly barren soil, save for a sprinkling of newly planted saplings, seedlings and shrubs.

For now, it's the still-denuded condition of Tennessee Gas Pipeline's restoration of a miles-long clearing through the mountainous Highlands park in northern West Milford and Vernon.



JEFF GREEN / STAFF

State environmental staff members say the start of reforestation meets the standards set, though some replanting is ongoing and it will take at least three years to gauge its success. And a federal energy agency finds the work satisfactory.

But not everyone agrees: Area residents and environmentalists argue Tennessee Gas has done only the bare minimum to restore the clearing, which some have dubbed "The Scar."

"We have a beautiful blue sky, beautiful woods and a desert in between," said Gary Adamkovich, a member of the North Jersey Pipeline Walkers, three Vernon residents certified to hike along the natural gas pipeline.

Tennessee Gas spent the last two years extending its so-called 300 Line, a 30-inch pipe, through the Highlands, North Jersey's premier water-generating lands. Running from Vernon to the western edge of the Monksville

Reservoir in West Milford, it parallels a 60-year-old pipeline and connects to it to increase capacity. The company also received permission this year to extend new pipeline 7.6 miles from West Milford across Ringwah and to a metering station in Mahwah.

This spring, the company says, it planted 80,000 trees and shrubs in the entire 16-mile strip, which includes portions of Pennsylvania.

The North Jersey Pipeline Walkers, a group of Vernon environmentalists, survey the area of Wawayanda State Park.

Replanting a forest

Trees planted by Tennessee Gas Pipeline:

Total in Wawayanda State Park: 38,000
 Total in pipeline path (16 miles): 80,000

Species:

- White Pine
- Scrub Oak
- Chestnut Oak
- Hemlock
- Ash

Source: NJ Department of Environmental Protection and Tennessee Gas Pipeline

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But the state Department of Environmental Protection says reforestation is experiencing problems: Many of the young trees planted are falling victim to this year's record hot weather.

Environmentalists say Tennessee Gas simply has not done enough to restore the 113 acres it cleared, nor kept its word.

"There is no way they planted all they said," said Diane Wexler, a Pipeline Walker. She said her group would not be able to walk the clearing without stepping on trees if Tennessee Gas had planted all that it pledged.

Richard Wheatley, spokesman for Tennessee Gas, said the company is committed to restoration and calls claims to the contrary "without merit." He added, "If you check with the [Federal Energy Regulatory Commission], you will find that that is not the case."

Tamara Young-Allen, a FERC spokeswoman, said the work complies with erosion control and maintenance plans, and that in June, inspectors did not find any problems.

Wheatley said the company continues to "actively monitor" the site, as well as take water samples and install erosion control devices. Monitoring will continue for three years after construction or until the DEP deems fit.

The state Highlands Council, which oversees the protection of 860,000 acres of watersheds, is holding a \$564,000 performance bond on the company's restoration job and will also monitor the area for at least three years. The council will release the funds only after trained environmental inspectors observe that vegetation is similar in density to that in surrounding areas.

The worries of residents and environmentalists were borne out in 2011, when heavy rains sent soil and debris runoff into the crystal waters of Lake Lookover in West Milford, sparking protests by the lake association. The association recently rejected a \$18,550 settlement offer from Tennessee Gas and the parties are now in negotiations. Lakeside residents want a lake cleaning.

On a recent tour, the Pipeline Walkers showed The Record the clearing, Lake Lookover and a Newark Watershed tract off Canistear Road in Vernon. A pink sign marking the start of the clearing in Vernon reads "No Net Loss." Activists disagree: Most of the plantings there are barely 6 inches tall. And some are dying from the effects of drought and foraging deer.

Parts of the clearing still look like a construction site, with debris, orange foam and at least one loose tarp. When asked about that, Wheatley said Tennessee Gas would determine whether materials belonged to the company and if they needed to be corrected or removed.

DEP spokesman Larry Hajna said the state Forest Service is keeping a "very close eye" on the area's reforestation and erosion control, and despite setbacks it is confident in the project's eventual success. Foresters have recently performed preliminary inspections of the state park, with a full inspection of initial tree plantings planned in a few weeks.

Most of the species planted are rated by tree experts as fast-growing, meaning they'll reach substantial heights in 10 years. But so far, most of the seedlings — smaller plantings — among the 38,000 trees rooted in New Jersey are not meeting the state requirement of 80 percent survivability, with hemlocks planted on rocky slopes faring the worst. But the company's tree-planting contractor has been active, replanting — without instruction to do so — some 100 trees that have died with species that are faring better, Hajna said. More will be replanted in the fall.

The DEP and Tennessee Gas also are discussing a greater ratio of more mature trees in parts of the pathway because they can better withstand extreme weather. The DEP is encouraging the company to take advantage of the best grass-planting season, which begins in September.

"The key is that they are not done yet," Hajna said, "and we will continue to keep on top of this to make sure everything is done right."

Where the construction right-of-way meets Lake Lookover, more than three dozen trees, many 12 feet tall, are braced by chains and fences. There also are berms and netting to prevent erosion.

Kate Millsaps, program assistant with the Sierra Club, said that area was given better treatment because Tennessee Gas responds when it is pressured.

"It's just a matter of cost-cutting for them," she said. "They can meet higher standards, but they won't do it unless there's pushback."

The company denied it was prioritizing its bottom line. Pre-planting surveys determined what was planted and where, Wheatley said, but "due to the rocky soil conditions and lack of topsoil in many areas, [the company] was limited as to the areas where larger trees could be planted."

Vernon Mayor Victor Marotta, who said Tennessee Gas has communicated openly and candidly with the township, recalled that the company's first pipeline was installed decades ago, noting that vegetation has since grown back.

Trees just take time, he said.

“The real issue is whether the company performed up to its permitting process. If it has not, we would know about it,” Marrotta said.

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