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## Mohican, Columbia Gas tree-clearing pact near

Utility, forest officials near agreement on how to work together

By *LISA MILLER*  
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PERRYSVILLE -- Columbia Gas Transmission and Ohio Department of Natural Resources officials said Thursday they are near an agreement on tree clearing in the Mohican Memorial State Forest.

That accord could come by the end of the year, although the future of the Clear Fork Gorge remains a key area of concern.

Columbia Gas communications manager Kelly Merritt agreed with Andy Ware, assistant chief of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources' forestry division, that negotiations are going well.

The state began acquiring land to create Mohican Memorial State Forest in 1928. Ware said the department has had a battery of attorneys look at its 1952 agreement with Columbia's predecessor. They insist Ohio is bound to let the utility maintain its natural gas lines and wellheads throughout the forest.

Ware said protecting the forest -- including the Clear Fork Gorge that has pipelines running through it -- is a major concern. Both sides are weighing environmental concerns and the impact on the area's tourism industry.

In late February 2007, an agreement was reached to clear areas within 60 feet of selected storage wells and for the removal of trees greater than 10 inches in diameter in a zone of 60 to 120 feet from each well. Trees down-slope from a well site, such as within the gorge, were not to be removed. Weeks later, a maintenance crew intending to clear a pipeline right-of-way on private property crossed into state property and cut down more than 100 trees. A lengthy investigation concluded the clearing was not intentional, and Columbia Gas did not willfully disregard the February deal.

Designed to prevent similar incidents, a June 2007 agreement included a \$10,000 Columbia Gas donation to establish an American chestnut nursery at Mohican and a plan to expedite talks on clearing along the company's pipelines.

On Thursday, William Moorhead, operations manager for the Columbia parent NiSource Gas Transmission & Storage, ODNR spokeswoman Beth Ruth, forest manager Tim Humphrey, Merritt and Ware showed how clearing is being conducted along the wellheads, what the gorge looks like now and how the chestnut trees are progressing.

In partnership with the Science Committee of the Ohio Chapter of the American Chestnut Foundation, Ohio University and Miami University, about 250 pure American chestnuts were planted in April on a 1.8-acre site in Discovery Forest.

The tiny chestnut trees are guarded by an 8-foot fence that protects the seedlings from grazing deer.

In their mature form, the trees will rise above white oaks, Ware said. The goal is to reintroduce the trees in Mohican and other state forests. The trees, which are about three years old, are planted in rows, with odd numbered rows containing seedlings from Ohio and even-numbered rows seedlings from other states.

Ware said the agency isn't getting complaints like it did when the clearing plan was announced in 2006.

Humphrey said the company keeps him posted about work it does in the forest.

Standing along the Clear Fork, Merritt pointed to what appeared to be the path of a natural gas pipeline down the side of the gorge and under the river.

"We have to be able to tell where they are, be able to get in there in an emergency," the company communications manager said. "We can't get our equipment up there to repair that (in its present state)."

Merritt said the wells in the gorge are some of the best performing wells in the forest.

According to Merritt, the three big issues for the company are demarcation and being able to find the lines; maintenance; and inspection -- by foot, vehicle or plane.

"The gorge needs special protection," Ware said. "When they think of Mohican, they think of this site."

Symbolically, during an interview, a bald eagle soared overhead.

Along with signs throughout the forest explaining the Columbia Gas equipment, the company also is developing an informational kiosk to explain the storage well operations. It will be located at the mountain bike trailhead site.

"The whole idea is just to educate people," Merritt said.

## Additional Facts

### At a Glance

#### TIMELINE

- **May 2006:** Columbia Gas Transmission announces plans to remove trees along rights of way and along wellheads "to ensure the continuous safe operation of its underground natural gas pipelines and storage field in the forest."
- **July 2006:** An open house, the first of two public forums on the tree clearing plan, drew more than 230 people. A number were unhappy and accused the company of controlling the meeting.
- **October 2006:** Second forum in Loudonville moderated by state Sen. Bill Harris allowed anyone to offer their thoughts on the proposed clearing.
- **November 2006:** Columbia Gas announced it rescheduled the clearing project.
- **February 2007:** Columbia Gas and Ohio Department of Natural Resources reach agreement to limit most tree clearing to an area within 60 feet of selected storage wells and to hold further talks about clearing along Columbia's natural gas pipelines in the area.

- **April 2007:** Maintenance crews crossed over into the forest while clearing a natural gas pipeline right-of-way on private property. An investigation concluded the episode was an accident.
- **February 2007:** Columbia Gas and ODNR agree to limit most tree clearing to an area within 60 feet of selected storage wells and to hold further talks about clearing along Columbia's natural gas pipelines in the area.
- **November 2008:** Both sides say they are close to reaching an agreement.

## **BY THE NUMBERS**

- 4,525 acres in Mohican State Forest.
- 56 gas storage wells in forest.
- 13 miles of natural gas pipelines.
- Eight well sites cleared in 2007, 11 cleared in 2008, 12 scheduled for maintenance in 2009.

**Source:** Ohio Department of Natural Resources

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