

Mekong River Jeopardized By Xayaburi Dam Construction, WWF Says

Thursday, December 01, 2011

<http://www.asianscientist.com/topnews/mekong-delta-xayaburi-dam-poyry-consulting-firm-review-2011/>

AsianScientist (Dec. 1, 2011) - The Mekong River's future hangs in the balance as its four surrounding countries decide whether to construct a dam on it.

The Mekong River stretches 4,800 km down to the South China Sea, making it the longest river in Southeast Asia. It is home to over 700 species of freshwater fish including four of the world's largest fish species, notably the endangered Mekong catfish. The Lower Mekong supports almost 60 million people who depend on it for their livelihood.

Earlier this year, the Joint Committee of the Mekong River Commission (MRC), an inter-governmental agency made up of representatives from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, met to discuss whether or not the controversial Xayaburi dam in Northern Laos should be built.

Vietnam's Minister of Environment and Natural Resources officially asked for a 10-year delay of mainstream dams, which was also supported by Cambodia's Minister for Water Resources.

All four countries decided to defer the final decision and leave it in the hands of their environment and water resource ministers, who will meet in Siem Reap, Cambodia next week.

Separately, the Lao government also commissioned a Finnish consulting firm, Pöyry, to provide a review of the Xayaburi dam's impact on biodiversity and fisheries, and the effectiveness of mitigation measures.

The review by Pöyry concluded that additional baseline data on biology, ecology, and livelihood restoration was needed as well as improved knowledge concerning migratory fish. Despite these gaps, Pöyry stated that the Xayaburi project met the requirements of the MRC's design guidelines.

“It is astounding that Pöyry affirms there are serious data gaps and weaknesses with the project and still gives it the all clear. Pöyry recommends dealing with the critical knowledge gaps during the construction phase. Playing roulette with the livelihoods of over 60 million people would not be acceptable in Europe so why is it different in Asia?” said Dr. Jian-hua Meng, WWF's Sustainable Hydropower Specialist.

According to the WWF, the Pöyry review failed to fully understand the impacts of the dam to fisheries and sediment flows. The Mekong's rich sediment is a crucial factor in maintaining the balance in the Mekong ecosystem and building up the delta.

“A failure to address the uncertainties with this project could have dire consequences for the

livelihoods of millions of people living in the Mekong river basin,” said Dr. Meng.

WWF recommends that the 10-year delay be carried out in order to gather the essential data needed using sound science and analysis. They also recommend that hydropower projects prioritize dams on Mekong tributaries instead which will have a lower impact and risk.

Source: [World Wildlife Fund for Nature](#).

Disclaimer: This article does not necessarily reflect the views of AsianScientist or its staff.