

Canadian firm under fire over Belize dam

Endangered species at risk: environmentalists

BY KARINA ROMAN

Environmentalists are worried a Canadian company's proposed hydroelectric dam in Belize will further imperil endangered species and cause irreparable harm to crucial migrating and breeding areas.

To draw attention to their concerns, The Sierra Club of Canada, Toronto-based Probe International, Washington-based Natural Resources Defence Council and scientists from North and Central America will make a presentation tonight on Parliament Hill to MPs, Canadian members of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and the public.

"It's not about anti-development or anti-energy development," said Grainne Ryder, policy director for environmental group Probe International. "It's that some of these areas in Belize are just too valuable to dally with."

Fortis Inc. of Newfoundland, a majority owner of Belize Electricity Ltd., has proposed building a 35-metre-high dam in the Macal River Valley, home to some of the most endangered animals in the world, including the scarlet macaw, the jaguar and Belize's national animal, the tapir.

On Earth Day in April, several noted scientists, including Dr. Peter Raven, president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki, wrote a letter to Fortis president and chief executive Stanley Marshall, calling the project "reckless."

"It is our opinion that the Chalillo dam would impact the ecosystems of the region and many of the species which inhabit it," they wrote. "The preponderance of existing evidence indicates that these impacts would be significant and long lasting."

But in a telephone interview yesterday, Mr. Marshall dismissed their concerns.

"They have personal opinions which they're entitled to. I, on the other hand, operate on facts," he said. "We will do an assessment when all the facts are in and then ... if we think this is environmentally acceptable in our own opinion, we will follow the proper procedures ... for asking for permission to develop the site." The final decision rests with the Belize government, he added.

He met with environmentalists in St. John's yesterday to hear their concerns after turning down their request to address the annual general meeting.