

Gaffe mars impact of petitions 4/10/02

BY WILL HILLIARD

The Telegram

Stan Marshall says the environmentalists who dropped off about 30,000 petitions at his St. John's office last month should have checked them more carefully before calling in the media.

Marshall, president and CEO of Fortis, the parent company of Newfoundland Power which plans to build a hydroelectric dam in Belize, said many of the petitions weren't even about the disputed Chalillo dam project — let alone against it.

He pointed this out Monday in a letter to Greg Malone, a St. John's environmentalist helping the high-profile campaign being spearheaded against the project by the U.S.-based Natural Resource Defence Council (NRDC).

"I suggested that before they deliver letters of protest in a public relations exercise, that they should first take the time to review them," said Marshall.

"Also in the boxes from the NRDC were numerous letters of protest and petitions addressed to President George Bush and various U.S. senators, protesting exploration in Alaska. There are also letters of protest to the Canadian Embassy and lumber distributors concerning logging in B.C., and to Mitsubishi about whale hunting in Mexico.

"NRDC members are obviously an unhappy lot."

Some samples of their discontent:

Michael Avery wrote: "Build the dam ... and take me off your mailing list."

An anonymous writer said: "If a Kennedy is against it, it must be a good thing."

"I'm staying out of Mexico's affairs," vowed James Williams.

Fortis received final approval last week from the government of Belize to start preliminary work on the dam project. At least two environmental groups are before the courts in Belize seeking stop-work injunctions.

The proposed dam has unleashed a flurry of protest from environmentalists who fear it will flood a sensitive jungle habitat. The thick riverbank vegetation is home to tapirs — Belize's floppy-nosed national animal — which share the remote area with scarlet macaws and jaguars.

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Opponents say the dam, which will generate only seven megawatts of electricity, is unnecessary and uneconomical, and say it will enrich only a small circle of Belizeans without cutting electricity rates for residents.

Their campaign was fortified when they brought in the NRDC, an international group that has placed the disputed Macal River area on a list of 12 environmentally important areas threatened by development.

Malone acknowledged Tuesday a handful of wayward petitions somehow got mixed into the pile delivered to Fortis' headquarters last month.

"It was truly a handful, and maybe there was a hundred blank ones, and even six or seven that were in support of the dam. But, there's still well over 29,500 petitions against it. And there's more on the Internet if (Marshall) wants to see them.

"Basically, he's looking at the grains of sand and ignoring the mountain," said Malone. "Stan Marshall continues to ignore not just one wildlife expert, but all and everyone who agrees, unanimously — from Dr. David Suzuki, to the Natural History Museum in Great Britain — that this site in Belize will suffer irrevocable damage."

Marshall said in Belize, a country of 240,000 people about the size of the Avalon Peninsula, seven megawatts of electricity means a great deal. He said power rates there, already three times what Canadians pay, will continue to rise if the dam isn't built.

Marshall has also defended the project saying the dam would afford the hurricane-prone region some badly needed flood control. He said much of the forest area to be flooded is already infested by the bark beetle, which threatens the pine forest and hillsides near the river.