



GARY HEBBARD/THE TELEGRAM

Fortis Inc. president and CEO Stan Marshall (left photo) was busy Wednesday morning preparing for the company's annual stockholders meeting at the Holiday Inn in St. John's when demonstrators greeted people arriving at the hotel for

the meeting. The protesters are against the building of a hydro dam in Belize, claiming it is ecologically unsound. From left are Eligorio Sho of Belize, Lori Heath and Luigi Chiaramont.

ENVIRONMENT

Chalillo dam opponents fail to sway Fortis

BY PAT DOYLE AND WILL HILLIARD
The Telegram

A handful of protesters demonstrated Wednesday morning outside the annual shareholders meeting of Fortis Inc. against the building of a hydroelectric dam in one of Central America's last remaining tracts of pristine wilderness.

Inside the St. John's Holiday Inn, environmentalist Elizabeth May pleaded with shareholders to get their company to abandon its proposed controversial project on a branch of the Macal River in Belize.

May, executive director of the Ottawa-based Sierra Club of Canada, speaking on a proxy during the question-and-answer period, called on them to "act responsibly and stop this project."

St. John's-based Fortis, the parent company of Newfoundland Power and power companies in the Maritimes, Ontario and Belize, is determined to build the Chalillo dam to generate seven megawatts of self-generated electricity.

The proposed dam has unleashed a flurry of protest from environmentalists who fear it will flood and destroy a sensitive jungle habitat, home to tapirs — Belize's floppy-nosed national animal — scarlet macaws and jaguars.

The government of Belize has approved the project. But it has yet to clear two court challenges filed by the Belizean Alliance of Conservation NGOs (non-government organizations)

to have the project cancelled on the grounds it violates the country's electricity laws.

Opponents say the dam is unnecessary and uneconomical, and will enrich only a small circle of Belizeans without cutting electricity rates for residents. They say Fortis stands to profit about \$750 million Cdn over 50 years from its proposed \$30-million investment.

At the meeting, May referenced sections in a project summary report, distributed at the meeting by Fortis, which stated "significant adverse effects" would occur if the dam is built. She cited a wildlife impact assessment report, which concluded the "no-build" option is the best one for wildlife in Belize.

She also handed out a single-page letter to Fortis shareholders, which indicated at the bottom that it was from Belizean shareholders of Fortis-owned Belize Electricity Co. The letter stated, in part: "We want you to know what we know — the proposed Macal River Upstream Storage Facility (Chalillo dam) is not in our best interests, economically or environmentally. ... We believe that only a few privileged people will benefit, while the rest of us will not. We do not support it. Stop now."

Fortis president and chief executive Stan Marshall quickly defended the project, saying it has gone through the appropriate assessment process and that on balance it is a good for the country of 240,000 people about the size of the Avalon Peninsula.

He said the National Environmental

Appraisal Committee of Belize had conducted an exhaustive study, and by a margin of 11-2 voted to accept it.

"We are not the ones that will make the decision," Marshall said. "It's the government and people of Belize who will make the decision."

Marshall told May, "It is offensive for you to come here and say you are speaking for the people of Belize."

But not every shareholder agreed with Marshall.

Shareholder opposed

Dennis Shortall, a shareholder who said Fortis is a great company and he is proud of it, told the meeting he cannot support the Belize project.

"People have asked me to come here and speak out," he said. "There are many people protesting the project in Belize."

Shortall said there are alternatives to damming the Macal River.

The campaign against the project is backed by the powerful U.S.-based Natural Resources Defence Council which has placed the Macal River area on a list of 12 "biogems" around the globe that are threatened by development, and enlisted Robert Kennedy Jr. and Harrison Ford to turn the Chalillo dam into a cause celebre.

Later, outside the meeting, May said she was disappointed with Marshall's response. "I was respectfully asking questions, but he choose to make it quite personal."

She hinted that a boycott of Fortis

products and services may be the next step.

In an interview, Marshall said "what it comes down to is someone in Toronto trying to tell Belizeans what to do."

He said the lawsuits in Belize are against the Belizean government, not Fortis. He said he is confident the suits won't be successful. "For the first time, they will be put to the test on what they are saying," he said of the critics.

Meanwhile, braving the wet and windy weather Wednesday, Eligorio Sho, a Maya Indian and naturalist from Belize who starred in a National Geographic film about the disputed Macal area, joined St. John's activist Greg Malone and other protesters to hand out leaflets to shareholders as they arrived at the Fortis-owned Holiday Inn.

Hotel officials ordered them to leave. Sho said the Macal River area is "going to go under the water 150 feet so all the food source from the river for those wildlife, not only scarlet macaw but we have jaguar, we have tapir, we have crocodile, we have kingfisher they feed on those trees."