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ENVIRONMENT

Protesters oppose Fortis plans for dam

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Almost 50 people stood in the pea soup fog Wednesday morning to protest Fortis Inc.'s involvement in a proposed Central American hydroelectric dam.

While shareholders quietly got ready for their annual meeting inside the Holiday Inn, protesters made noise in front of the hotel, singing, banging drums and handing out pamphlets to passing pedestrians and drivers.

The protesters, comprised of various local environmental and social justice groups and a few visitors from Belize and the U.S., said the dam planned for Belize's Macal River would create an environmental disaster.

They said the dam, proposed by Fortis-owned Belize Electricity Ltd. (BEL), would flood an area of tropical forest that is home to many endangered species, most notably the scarlet macaw — a large parrot which numbers less than 250 in Belize.

A few of the protesters stood in front

of the entrance to give pamphlets to shareholders as they went inside for the meeting.

"Some people just ignore us, and some just say thank you very much," said Stephanie, a protester who did not want to give her last name.

"Some (shareholders) have actually come out of the building and requested them. So I think they want to know why people are outside demonstrating."

It was a polite protest. The demonstrators stayed outside the hotel, only sending one representative into the meeting. John Bennett of the Sierra Club attended as a guest of one of the shareholders.

"If there is an opportunity to ask questions, I will ask why they insist on going ahead with this dam when it's going to destroy one of the last pristine areas in Central America, and why they would go ahead with it given their own consultants have pointed out it's not economic," he said.

Throughout the debate over the dam, officials from Fortis and BEL have repeatedly asserted that the people oppos-

ing it come almost entirely from outside Belize.

"You would be hard-pressed to find anyone in Belize who is opposed to the project," BEL president Lynn Young said in St. John's Tuesday.

This is a public relations ploy to divert attention from the real issues, the protesters said.

Sharon Matola, the director of the Belize Zoo who attended the protest, is originally from the U.S., but has lived in Belize since 1982 and holds Belizean citizenship. A government-run newspaper, however, has cast her as an outsider throughout coverage of the issue.

Ambrose Tillett, a Belizean who came to St. John's to ask Newfoundlanders for help fighting the project, said there are people in his country who oppose the dam. On Saturday, a coalition of residents and business people plan to hold a demonstration in a town next to one of BEL's hydro plants, he said.

"A lot of information about this project is not publicly available," he said. "Lots of people don't really understand

what's involved. And now that information is slowly getting into the public, people are beginning to understand, yes this thing does affect my environment."

Tillett used to work for BEL as a senior planner, but left after it was bought by Fortis due to "philosophical differences." He said there are alternative forms of energy available that aren't as environmentally dangerous, namely cogeneration, a form of energy production that uses the waste byproducts of sugar cane, one of Belize's major crops.

"Fortis has taken the position that they're going to go ahead with this project because it's good for them," said Tillett, who was wearing a Fortis jacket from his days as an employee.

Greg Mitchell, of the Humber Environment Action Group in Corner Brook, said this is something people outside of Belize should be concerned about.

"This is a Newfoundland company that's down there, so I think ... Newfoundlanders have a stake," he said.

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