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The fight over Chalillo is not environmental

For some time now, the environmentalists have been at war with BEL and parent company, Fortis. Recent information, however, reveals that the real issues at hand are far greater than the environment. The Fortis, BEL, BECOL relationship screams anti-trust. One company—Fortis, controls the generation, production and transmission of electricity in this country.

Fortis, in its new power purchase agreement, forces BEL to buy power from BECOL first, irrespective of cost. So far that has meant that BEL pays over US\$8 million for power from BECOL annually. According to BEL's figures, Chalillo will double the output of Mollejon. This means that some US\$16 million will continue to leave our shores every year. A generous tax exemption ensures that not a penny of that will attract any taxes.

The truth is that there are many people, possibly the majority of Belizeans, who would willingly sacrifice the Raspaculo Valley if it meant that we would be able to get more reliable power, eliminate the use of diesel engines, and eventually benefit from a rate reduction. The facts do not support that though, and the secretive, adversarial approach taken by BEL in explaining Chalillo has left many people in doubt.

The picture we are left with is that Chalillo will be built because it represents a huge increase in profits for For-

tis, parent company to BECOL. Everything else is second nature. The engineers at BEL know this, but because they have to buy power from a company also owned by their parent company, they must continue to sell Chalillo.

Add to this, we now also know that commencing 1 July, BEL will begin (we do not yet know how) recovery of \$4,655,733 from consumers. They will do so every year thereafter when their operating costs increase. To put it bluntly, BEL is assured of making a profit come what may.

If consumers will have to shoulder this burden no matter what, government should explain the reason for privatisation. If the company will not be allowed to absorb any of the risks associated with energy generation, production and transmission, what really is their purpose here? The government of Belize could have continued to own the company and with consumers shouldering all the risks, the country could have enjoyed the profits.

The only thing more dangerous than a public monopoly is a private monopoly. All our utility companies are today in private hands, and all of them continue to guard their monopolies jealously; and as they do, poor people continue to perish.

We are now convinced that the bigger issue does not concern the environment, it is about big, big money.