

Duke Energy in middle of conflict over dam

Conservationists want firm to urge builder to scrap Belize project

By BRUCE HENDERSON

Charlotte Observer

A conservation group is pressuring Duke Energy to help scrap a dam-construction project the group says would flood one of Central America's most important tropical forests.

Duke acknowledges the project in Belize would benefit a hydroelectric dam that Duke Energy International owns downstream. But company officials say Duke has no stake in the proposed dam.

"It's not our project," said Bryant Kinney, a vice president of Duke Energy Services. "This was something that was going on long before we got there."

The site of the proposed dam, inside a forest reserve on the Macal River, is some of the continent's best remaining jaguar habitat, says the Natural Resources Defense Council. The group says the project also would threaten the last 250 large, colorful birds in a subspecies of scarlet macaws. Ocelots, crocodiles, spider monkeys and tapirs also abound in the river valley.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature, the world's largest such organization, took note of the project at its World Conservation Congress in Jordan last month. A resolution urged the company proposing the dam, and the government of Belize, to kill the project unless studies prove it would not significantly hurt the environment.

Proposing the new dam is Belize Electricity Ltd. A major owner of BEL is Fortis Inc., a Canadian company with stakes in six electric utilities in Canada, the United States, Belize and the Cayman Islands.

Duke bought its 25-megawatt hydro station on the Macal River, among several others, in 1999. Belize's Social Security Administration owns 5 percent of the station, Kinney said.

Duke's dam suffers from low water flow some times of the year. The dam proposed upriver by Belize Electricity Ltd. would provide a more consistent flow, allowing it to produce more electricity, Kinney said.

Duke should insist on alternatives to the new dam, said the conservation group. NRDC said its supporters have flooded Duke with 20,000 messages protesting the dam; Kinney said he's received a few hundred e-mails.

"Our feeling is (Duke) is part of the overall scheme for the Chalillo dam," said Jacob Scherr, NRDC's director of international programs.

"We'd like for Duke to play a more affirmative role in putting an end to this project and promoting environmentally acceptable alternatives."

Scherr said BEL has wildlife studies of the region under way, after Belizean environmental officials rejected its initial environmental analysis as incomplete. Neither BEL nor Fortis officials could be reached.

Kinney said Duke has urged BEL to evaluate alternatives to the dam, such as extending electrical service through transmission wires or installing natural gas- or diesel-powered generators.

"We'll continue to work with BEL and the country to arrive at the best solution," Kinney said.

"Our goal is to deliver state-of-the-art energy solutions in an environmentally sensitive way."

Duke Energy International also has hydroelectric plants in Brazil, Peru, Bolivia and Argentina, Kinney said.

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Environmentalists urge Duke Energy to block dam construction
CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) _ Duke Energy says it has nothing to do with the construction of a new dam in Belize that a conservation group says would flood tropical forests.

Proposing the new dam is Belize Electricity Limited, but Charlotte-based Duke Energy acknowledges that a hydroelectric dam its international unit owns downstream on the Macal River would benefit from the new dam.

"It's not our project," said Bryant Kinney, a vice president of Duke Energy Services. "This was something that was going on long before we got there."

The site of the proposed dam, inside a forest reserve on the river, is some of the continent's best remaining jaguar habitat, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council.

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