

NGOs Go to Court to Stop Belize Dam

A large dam that would do serious environmental harm to Belize's Macal River valley – a rich tropical floodplain home to jaguars, scarlet macaws and many other rare or endangered species – was conditionally approved by the Belize government in November. Now, environmental groups in Belize are preparing to go to court to stop the dam. The groups say the government's clearance of the project without public hearings or a detailed environmental mitigation plan violates national laws.

Fortis Inc. – a billion-dollar Canadian corporation that is the majority owner of Belize's only electric utility – is partnered with the Belize government to build the 50-meter-high Chalillo Dam project, which would flood more than 2,000 acres of unique, pristine habitat. Although Fortis's CEO Stan Marshall has stated that he'd stop the project if it was found to have "untoward" environmental effects, the company is pressing ahead despite the fact that Fortis consultants found the project to have serious unmitigable impacts.

Scientists from the Natural History Museum in London hired as part of the project's EIA team "highly recommend" in their final

report that the scheme be dropped. Their report says that the dam will irreparably harm one of the most biologically diverse regions left in Central America.

Alastair Rogers, a co-author of the report, told *New Scientist* magazine, "It is absolutely clear that constructing a dam at Chalillo would cause major, irreversible negative environmental impacts and destroy many important archaeological sites." The scientists advised that "the benefits of the Chalillo dam project are significantly lower than the costs."

Another Canadian company, AMEC, received some US\$314,000 from the Canadian International Development Agency to conduct the dam's environmental assessment. The widely condemned report dismisses the recommendations from the British research team, and ignores the conclusions by team geologists, who believe that the site is geologically unstable. Their dam-supportive EIA paid off: AMEC was recently awarded the contract to design the dam, according to press reports from Belize.

The project could wipe out the Belizean subspecies of scarlet macaw, seriously threatening the bird's overall survival. Jaguar habitat would also be lost at a time when jaguar

experts are saying that the animal is in trouble in two-thirds of its historic range.

The \$30 million dam is also predicted to raise electricity rates for Belizeans and bring them no economic benefit, according to a study by Conservation Strategy Fund (CSF). Fortis already charges Belizeans three times more for electricity than the average in Canada. CSF is a US research group specializing in environmental economics.

The area threatened by the new dam lies inside the "government-protected" Chiquibul Forest Reserve and includes part of Chiquibul National Park. The Macal River and its tributaries contain the only known nesting sites in all Belize for the largest kind of scarlet macaw – a subspecies that numbers fewer than 250 individuals. ■

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Sign an online petition to stop the dam at:
www.stopfortis.org/petition.html
For more information, contact:
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