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Press Release

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Independent Experts Find Fatal Flaws in Amazon Dam Studies

A group of independent experts -- including internationally-renowned authorities on the Amazon -- have found serious errors and omissions in the environmental impact assessment (EIA) for Brazil's massive Madeira River hydroelectric project. The experts found the EIA to be inadequate, and recommend that additional studies be undertaken to evaluate the project's impacts.

The independent studies were commissioned by the Rondônia Public Attorney's office, and financed by the consortium seeking to build the dams. Brazil's environmental protection agency, IBAMA, is currently holding public hearings in Rondônia, the Brazilian state affected by the project, and will then make a decision on whether or not to approve construction of the dams.

Glenn Switkes, Latin America Program Director for International Rivers Network, said; "The experts' review demonstrates that a poorly conceived project with the potential to devastate one of the Amazon's most bio-diverse regions is being railroaded through by the Brazilian government. It is crucial that IBAMA take these opinions into account before it is too late".

Among the panelists was José Tundisi, limnologist and specialist on hydroelectric reservoir management with the International Ecological Institute in São Paulo state, who found the data on sediment accumulation in the reservoirs to be "inconsistent" and "unreliable". The Madeira carries one of the highest volumes of soil, sand, and clay of any river in the world. "Sediment studies should always be undertaken on the river basin level", he advised. IBAMA limited the study area to that stretch of the Madeira which the project proponents said would be flooded by the dams.

Philip Fearnside, ecologist with the National Institute for Amazon Research (INPA), found that there was insufficient data to back up project proponents' assertions that sediment accumulation in the reservoir would not affect the dam's economic viability. He also found that Jirau dam would flood a wider area than projected, extending into neighboring Bolivia.

Ronaldo Barthem, of the Goeldi Museum in Belém, and Michael Goulding, of INPA -- arguably the world's most preeminent experts on Amazon migratory fish species -- warned that under certain conditions, the dams could lead to the extinction of ecologically and economically important fish species such as the dourada and babão. Besides blocking upstream migrations of adult fish, most larva and fry heading downstream would be ground up by the turbines.

Even the area to be flooded by the dam could be seriously underestimated by the studies. Bruce Forsberg, a scientist with INPA, found that "the area flooded could be double that projected (529 km²) by the project proponents ... casting doubt on the results of all studies carried out to date". Forsberg also examined the risk that mercury discarded into the river by gold miners would make its way into the food chain as a result of the dams, and found that no attempt was made to quantify how much mercury a river bank dweller eating a daily diet of fish would ingest.

Other potential problems identified by the specialists include impacts on downstream lakes which are important fishing grounds; proliferation of vectors for the spread of malaria and other water-borne diseases; and the socio-economic consequences of the migration of tens of thousands of men to the region in search of work.

According to Roberto Smeraldi of Friends of the Earth, Amazonia, "the project aims to transform the entire western Amazon, but the government is treating it as if it had only local impacts."

The Brazilian government is actively promoting the construction of Santo Antonio and Jirau Dams on the Madeira River as part of a larger four-dam cascade to generate electricity and permit barges to navigate 4,200 km up the Madeira to its upstream tributaries in Peru and Bolivia. Environmentalists say the project would not only affect the high biodiversity of the region, but that the Madeira waterway would spur the advance of soy plantations in the Amazon rainforest and surrounding tropical savannas.

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