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## Vietnam Doubts Sustainability of Second Lao Dam Project on Mekong



Le Duc Trung (C) speaks at a briefing on the Don Sahong dam in Laos' Champasak province, Nov. 12, 2013. RFA photo

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Vietnam has joined Cambodia in questioning the sustainability of the planned Don Sahong dam project on the Mekong River in southern Laos, saying more environmental impact studies are needed before the scheme moves forward.

Le Duc Trung, director general of the Vietnam National Mekong Committee under the Ministry of Natural Resources, and who recently visited the site where the dam will be built some two kilometers (1.6 miles) upstream from the Cambodian border, said Tuesday that his government “still has a lot of questions” about the project.

The official said Vietnam, which lies downstream from the proposed dam site, remained unclear about how the project would affect the river's fish stocks and other important ecosystems, and how that could in turn impinge upon the food security of riparian communities.

“The questions involve the [needs of the] specific habitat,” the official said, speaking at a press conference in Pakse district, Champasak province after touring the site in the Siphandone area of Laos, where the Mekong splits into multiple channels, one of which will be bridged by the dam.

“[What] physical characteristics [of the area] will be altered in order to maintain fish migration when the Hou Sahong [channel] is completely dammed?” he asked.

The official said that “more studies should be carried out” before Laos can build the 260-megawatt hydropower project.

### Ready to proceed

Landlocked Laos, which hopes to become the battery of Southeast Asia by selling electricity to its neighbors, has indicated that it is ready to proceed with the project, regardless of mounting criticism from environmental watchdogs, nongovernmental organizations and local communities.

In September, Laos told a regional body overseeing development of the Mekong River that dam construction is expected to begin in November, although preliminary groundwork around the dam site has gone on for months.

Earlier this week, Deputy Minister of Energy and Mines Viraponh Viravong told reporters who were taken on a tour of the dam site that local villagers are not allowed to fish in the area, saying the volume of fish there had decreased.

The ban eliminates a major source of income and food security for local residents, who have been assured that those who can no longer fish for a living because of the dam will be provided with alternative jobs.

Environment groups, including U.S.-based International Rivers, have warned that the project “spells disaster” for fish migration on the Mekong and threatens regional food security.

They said the dam will block the only section of the Mekong River where fish can pass during the dry season on a large scale.

Officials and experts working on the dam have claimed that much of the criticism of the project stems from misinformation

and outdated reports.

### **Dams scrapped**

Vietnam recently cancelled its own plans to build two dams on the Dong Nai River, which International Rivers said would have threatened a United Nations-recognized “Biosphere Reserve Zone.”

Hanoi shelved the plans in response to pressure from local environmental groups.

A study by Vietnam’s Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment had reported that the Dong Nai 6 and Dong Nai 6A dams would destroy more than 327 hectares (808 acres) of forests, 128 of which are located in Cat Tien National Park.

In May, UNESCO refused to recognize Cat Tien National Park as a Natural World Heritage site due to threats from hydropower plants and the animal trade, advising that the park apply stricter and more effective protection and management measures.

In October, Vietnam’s Deputy Prime Minister Hoang Trung Hai axed the two projects.

Earlier this year, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung called for all hydropower projects across the country to undergo thorough examinations in order to increase dam safety and in May the government scrapped plans to build 338 hydropower plants because they didn’t meet environmental standards.

### **Neighborly relations**

Last month following the decision to cancel the Dong Nai dams, International Rivers praised Vietnam for “taking measures to try and prevent impacts from dams built in neighboring countries, particularly those planned for the Mekong mainstream.”

It cited the Deputy Prime Minister’s efforts to convince Mekong countries to ratify a convention which would provide a mechanism to prevent dams from being built that could have large-scale trans-boundary impacts.

But International Rivers said that while Vietnam was making a concerted effort to evaluate the impact and safety of existing and planned dams in the country, “Laos is plowing ahead with plans to dramatically alter the Mekong mainstream, with no concern for the impacts on its neighbors, much less their input on the projects.”

It said Laos’ plans for the Don Sahong would “[put] the world’s largest inland fishery in jeopardy and [threaten] to push Vietnam and Cambodia closer to a food crisis.”

### **Commission challenges**

The dam has prompted a formal complaint against Laos from downstream Cambodia to the Mekong River Commission (MRC), a four-nation body that oversees development along the key regional waterway.

Environmental groups have said Laos is avoiding MRC requirements to consult its neighbors before building the dam by claiming it is not on the Mekong mainstream.

Laos is also building the first dam on the mainstream Lower Mekong, the Xayaburi, which environmental groups have said poses a similar devastating threat to regional food security.

Reported by RFA’s Lao Service. Written in English by Joshua Lipes.