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Contact: Carl Middleton, Mekong Program Coordinator, Tel: + 1 510 848 1155 (office),
+ 1 510 717 4745 (cell), carl@internationalrivers.org

Don Sahong Dam Could Affect Millions of People: Report Open letter reveals widespread concern amongst scientific community

An independent scientific report made public last week has revealed that the Don Sahong Dam, proposed for the Mekong River's mainstream in southern Laos, could threaten the food security of millions of people in Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. The report was written by Dr. Ian Baird, an affiliate of the Polis Project on Ecological Governance at the University of Victoria, Canada, and a leading expert on fisheries in the Khone Falls area of Southern Laos.

According to Dr. Baird's research, the Don Sahong Dam would block the migration of many important commercial fish species that pass through the Khone Falls area throughout the year. These migrations are crucial to the fishes' lifecycle. The paper states that "fisheries losses in the Mekong region from the Don Sahong Dam could negatively impact the nutritional status of hundreds of thousands or even millions of people dependent on these fisheries, thus decreasing the health of a large human population, especially in parts of Laos, Cambodia and Thailand where nutritional standards are already low."

According to the paper, the mitigation measures proposed in the project's draft environmental impact assessment are unlikely to be effective. There is no known fish pass technology that could cope with the unique biological requirements of all the fish species that migrate past the Khone Falls each year. The developer's proposal to widen an adjacent channel is highly risky and is likely to be unfeasible because it would require major engineering works that would be extremely costly.

The report was sent to the Lao and Cambodian governments. In addition, an open letter endorsed by 44 leading fisheries scientists, nutritionists and development workers from the region and around the world has also been prepared. The open letter urges the Lao government and other concerned parties to "prioritize alternative options for meeting Laos' development needs, options that would protect natural resources while supporting people's food security and decreasing poverty."

"This report and open letter demonstrate that the scientific community is gravely concerned about the potential impacts of the Don Sahong Dam on regional fisheries," said Dr. Carl Middleton, Mekong Program Coordinator for International Rivers. "The project could thrust hundreds of thousands of people into greater hunger and poverty, all for a few hundred megawatts of electricity that isn't needed. The Don Sahong Dam simply does not add up."

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“We’re hoping that the Lao government will recognize the huge risks of building the Don Sahong Dam and not approve the project. There are better ways to meet the region’s energy needs, whilst at the same time ensuring sustainable development for the people of Laos,” added Dr. Middleton.

The Don Sahong Dam is being proposed for the Hou Sahong Channel in the Khone Falls area of Southern Laos, less than two kilometers from the Cambodian border. The US\$300 million project is being proposed by the Malaysian company Mega First Corporation Berhad and would generate between 240 and 360 MW of electricity. The project was expected to give notification to the Mekong River Commission earlier this year, signaling the Lao government’s intention to move forward with the dam, but has been delayed due to a lack of a market for its power. The Hou Sahong Channel has been shown to be the only channel that fish can easily pass year-round as there are no waterfalls along its course. It is especially important for long-distance upriver dry season migrations.

More information:

- *The Don Sahong Dam: Potential Impacts on Regional Fish Migrations, Livelihoods and Human Health* by Dr. Ian Baird is available at http://polisproject.org/PDFs/Baird%202009_Don%20Sahong.pdf
- The open letter from fisheries scientists, nutritionists and development workers is available at <http://tinyurl.com/DSopenletter>
- Visit International Rivers’ Don Sahong Dam webpage: www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/2101
- Download International Rivers’ fact sheet “Mekong Mainstream Dams: Threatening Southeast Asia’s Food Security”: www.internationalrivers.org/en/node/4586

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