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Chile Divided On Plan to Dam Aysen's Baker, Pascua Rivers

by Guest
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A multibillion dollar plan by Chile's two leading electricity providers to build five massive dams in Patagonia has sparked a fierce national debate, pitting the country's leading environmentalists and their congressional allies against a powerful energy lobby that enjoys clear backing from top government officials. At stake in this ongoing discourse is the fate of two potent rivers: the glacier-fed Baker and Pascua.

Located more than 1,600 km south of Santiago in Chile's sparsely populated Region XI, an area also known as Aysen, the pristine waterways were until recently virtually unheard of by the general public. They had not, however, escaped the attention of Endesa, a former state-owned company that is now a huge multinational controlled by Spanish and Italian capital. By its own admission, Endesa has been eyeing the Baker and Pascua rivers for more than 40 years, sizing them up as huge potential energy sources.

Now, partnered with Chilean energy company Colbun, Endesa is finally ready to tap into those rivers. In 2006, Endesa and Colbun which together provide more than 55% of Chile's total electricity formed a joint entity called HidroAysen. Soon after, the company unveiled plans to build two large dams on the Baker, Chile's largest river, and three on the Pascua.

This past August, HidroAysen presented the project for approval by government environmental authorities, who face the onerous task of sifting through the company's 10,000-page Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

By far the most ambitious energy project ever proposed in Chile, the five dams would together boast an installed generating capacity of 2,750 megawatts equivalent to roughly 20% of the country's current available electricity. HidroAysen expects the project to cost US$3.2 billion. That price tag does not include an additional US$2 billion needed to connect the Aysen dams to energy-hungry central and northern Chile.

The Canadian-owned company Transelec plans to carry out that task by erecting a 2,250 km transmission line, potentially the world's longest. Backers of the project claim the 2,750 MW will go a long way toward meeting Chile's growing appetite for electricity, estimated to grow by some 6% annually. The energy source, furthermore, is clean and efficient, HidroAysen insists. And, because the water is right here in Chile, it is not unlike imported oil and natural gas subject to uncertain price and supply variations.
Concerns about impact of dams

Not everyone, however, shares the company's enthusiasm for the behemoth venture. For two years now activists in Region XI have campaigned to stop the project, insisting it will ruin the Baker and Pascua Rivers and open up Chilean Patagonia to further industrial degradation. HidroAysen is not the only multinational looking to set up shop in Aysen. Swiss-owned mining company Xstrata has gone public with its own plans to build large-scale hydroelectric power plants in the region.

"The biggest problem is that it's incoherent with the type of development we've chosen for the region," said Peter Hartmann, a Coyhaique (Region XI) resident and leading member of a group called the Citizen Coalition for Aysen Life Reserve (Coalicion Ciudadana por Aysen Reserva de Vida, CCARV).

"We want to see development by and for the people of the region, development that uses rather than destroys the region's exceptional qualities," Hartmann added. "The development model that's imported from abroad and involves these types of huge projects is completely the opposite. It involves destroying what's here, taking what there is to take, and leaving nothing behind."

The CCARV joined forces with high-profile Chilean environmentalists such as Sara Larraín and Juan Pablo Orrego, who in turn helped attract the attention of influential US nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) like the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and International Rivers. Last October the various Chilean and foreign organizations opposing the project formed an umbrella group called the Patagonia Defense Council (Consejo para la Defensa de la Patagonia Chilena, CDP), which is busy preparing various legal challenges to the dam project.

A handful of pro-environment senators and deputies known collectively as the Green Bench have also joined the CDP's Patagonia sin Represas (Patagonia without Dams) campaign. Critics of the dam project insist it is not only objectionable but also unnecessary. Rather than approve a venture that relies on outdated technology, they argue, Chilean authorities ought to encourage investment in projects using nonconventional energy sources, or NCES.

A recent report by the Universidad de Chile and Universidad Tecnica Federico Santa María concluded that, by 2025, Chile could generate as much as 40% of its electricity from NCES. "Instead of running a big, direct current line the whole length of Chile

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