

## Run-off dam met with reservation

Thais fear impact of Lao dams but fail to realise they are to meet their power demands, writes Apinya Wipatayotin in Nakhon Phanom

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The hydro-electric power plant planned in Luang Prabang will not have any big transboundary impact on Thailand, said the head of Laos' Department of Energy Policy and Planning, who argued that with Thailand's support, the project stands to benefit everyone.

Department chief Chansaveng Buongnong said hydro-electric power generation lies at the heart of Laos' core economic development strategy due to the abundance of natural resources which could support such projects.

'Laos also has significant regional clients, like Thailand, who regularly buy power from Lao plants,' he said.

'Moreover, these projects help lower unemployment rates and bring development to rural areas.'

He also insisted Laos' hydropower scheme will only have a limited impact on Thailand's river ecosystem, as specially-constructed 'fish passages' will allow fish to continue living and breeding along the dammed stretch of the river.

'Our energy ministers have discussed the project, which boosted our confidence on the project's future. This will be Laos' second run-off dam after the Xayaburi dam, which may begin operating some time this year,' he said at the first Procedure for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement (PNPCA) meeting for the project in Nakhon Phanom.

The second and third PNPCA meetings will be held in Amnat Charoen and Loei next month.

The process is required under the cooperative agreement on sustainable Mekong development signed by Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand back in 1995.

Any developer planning a project on the main stretch of the Mekong River will have to listen to the other members' concerns about the project.

That said, the agreement does not empower the other members to oppose the project.

But the People's Network of Eight Provinces along the Mekong slammed the Luang Prabang dam, saying the PNPCA process has failed to protect and preserve the Mekong River's resources.

They called on the government to invest in alternative energy sources to reduce power imports from Laos.

It said that higher power consumption in Thailand is the key factor which necessitated the construction of more hydro-electric power plants in Laos.

The project, which is co-owned by the Lao government and a consortium of Thai and Vietnamese companies, will see a run-off hydro-electric power plant with a capacity of about 1,460 megawatt constructed along the Mekong River, between the Pak Beng dam up north and the Xayaburi dam.

Any electricity generated by the dam is intended for export to Thailand and Vietnam.

Construction is expected to wrap up in 2027, and the work will be carried out by CH Karnchang, the company behind the Xayaburi dam.

Mr Chansaveng said that the Luang Prabang dam, like the Xayaburi dam, will be able to withstand heavy floods and earthquakes and improve water management in the area.

Tuangtong Jutagate, of Ubon Ratchathani University's Faculty of Agriculture, said the challenge now is proving whether these fish passages will actually help the river's fish population, as some species of fish require depth, instead of unrestricted access, to breed.

'There are at least seven local fish species which may end up disappearing due to the loss of islets along the river which they rely on,' he said.

'There are no measures in place to limit the impact of the dam, and this is certainly a transboundary issue which will have an impact on fish populations along the river.'

Laos is planning to construct a total of five run-off river dams along the Mekong -- Xayaburi, Don Sahong, Pak Beng, Pak Klai and Luang Prabang.

Suriya Kotamee, chairman of a local research network focusing on the lower Songkram River, expressed concern the project will put further pressure on the Mekong River and its tributaries, which has already been affected by the construction of the Xayaburi dam.

He added that residents who were affected by the Xayaburi dam have not received any assistance from the government.

'The reduced flow due to the dams will deal a critical blow to the already-declining fish population, as well as communities who depend on the river,' he said.

'A fund should be set up to help those in the lower Mekong basin whose livelihoods were affected by the dams.'

The secretary-general of the Office of National Water Resources, Somkiat Prajamwong, promised to submit all inputs from the meeting to the Thailand's National Mekong Commission Secretariat and Vientiane.

He also said that while the Luang Prabang dam will have a smaller impact on Thailand than the Xayaburi dam, any work on the project must be managed in such a way to ensure they pose minimal impact on the environment and locals' needs are taken into account.

'Complaints about the Xayaburi dam should be considered,' he said.