



*Forum Report: February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010*

## **Regional Mekong Delta Forum Urges Fish and Food Are a Regional Priority, Not Mainstream Dams**

[Can Tho, Vietnam] At Can Tho University on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 160 representatives from academia, civil society and government agencies met for the 'International Forum on Mekong Environment and Livelihoods: The Changing Situation and Trans-boundary Implications.' The meeting discussed recent proposals to build eleven hydropower dams on the Mekong River's mainstream. Participants' considered a number of concerns about the dams' impacts on the delta in Vietnam, in particular on agriculture and fisheries.

The meeting discussed the importance of Vietnam's Mekong delta, the country's 'rice basket,' to Vietnam's food security and economy; Vietnam's delta region presently grows around 50% of the country's rice crop, 75% of the total fish production, and 70% of the fruit crop. The meeting heard how the delta's remarkable productivity is linked to the health of the wider Mekong ecosystem. Fish migrate, for example, between the Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia, the delta region, and the upper stretches of the river. The Tonle Sap Lake also acts as the heart beat of the Mekong, reducing the impacts of saline intrusion and flooding in the delta by regulating water levels.

The forum learned details and the status of plans now being considered by the governments of Cambodia, Thailand, and Lao to construct eleven dams on the Mekong River's mainstream; Of these dams, eight are located in Lao, two are located on the Thai-Lao border, and two are located in Cambodia.

One of the key concerns raised by participants at the forum was the Mekong mainstream dams' impacts on the river's fisheries, which are presently the world's largest inland fishery and feed millions of people. If built, the mainstream dams would block the major fish migrations that are critical to the life cycle of 70% of the Mekong's commercial fish catch. The meeting heard how there is consensus amongst international scientists that the dam's impacts to these fisheries would not be able to be mitigated. Several participants commented "We eat fish, we cannot eat electricity."

Presentations to the forum identified some of the impacts that the proposed mainstream dams would cause to the Mekong delta region. These included changes to the quality, quantity and timing of water flows that enters and leaves the Mekong Delta, which in turn will impact the delta's fisheries and food production. Unpredictable saline intrusion, for example, could cause significant agricultural damage.

The forum heard how fertile sediments and detritus carried by the Mekong River presently help replenish the delta's agricultural land and provide food for fish.

Participants were concerned that building dams on the Mekong River's mainstream would block the movements of sediments resulting in the need for costly artificial fertilizers to sustain agricultural production and loss of fisheries. "Hungry water" or water deprived of sediments due to the mainstream dams would try to compensate in downstream areas and thus would increase the rate of bank erosion downstream. At present, the Mekong Delta has the highest erosion rate in the entire basin.

The forum also heard that the Mekong Basin does not end at the coastline of the Delta but extends to the "Mekong Plume" area in the South China Sea (known as East Sea in Vietnam). The food web and thus fisheries of the East Sea is strongly linked to the supply of nutrients (organic matters) from the Mekong River. Productivity of fisheries in the Mekong Plume will be reduced with the expected reduction of the sediment load carried downstream of the Mekong River due to the proposed mainstream dams.

The impacts of climate change, including rising sea-level, are an important threat to the Vietnam delta, which is recognized as one of the twelve deltas in the world most at risk. The forum learned how Mekong mainstream dams would compound the severe impacts already anticipated to be experienced in the delta, including those due to changing river hydrology and sediment load.

The wider impacts of hydropower development were also mentioned, as participants shared their experiences from throughout the Mekong region. The forum's participants recognized the need for closer cooperation between the people of the Mekong region, given the failure of the Mekong River Commission to adequately address key challenges raised by the Mekong mainstream dam plans.

Responding to the urgent questions raised about the future of the Mekong River and its people, the forum offered a number of recommendations, including: building networks to improve communication and information sharing; undertaking more research to deepen knowledge and understanding; and working in cooperation with local authorities to build a shared understanding of the key issues. The need to integrate both scientific and local forms of knowledge was also recognized.

The forum learned that one of the key drivers supporting construction of mainstream dams was the flawed electricity planning process in Thailand, which presently promotes large power projects such as large dams and coal-fired power stations even though better options exist including energy efficiency and renewable energy solutions. The meeting therefore encouraged all Mekong countries, especially the rapidly industrializing countries of China and Vietnam, to learn from these mistakes so as to avoid the social and environmental costs suffered by Thailand, and to protect the region's natural resources for present and future generations.

The meeting recognized that the mainstream dams' developers were absent from the forum's discussions and therefore recommended that they should hear about the impacts the dams will cause to the delta and the wider Mekong River and its peoples.

Given that the population in the region is expected to increase by thirty to fifty percent by 2025, meeting regional food security will be a significant challenge. Food security is the foundation on which other important forms of development are built, such as good health, education, and productive working life. Therefore, the costs and benefits of proposed major development projects such as Mekong mainstream dams should be

considered from the perspective of regional food security and wider development objectives, and not only economic factors.

The 'International Forum on Mekong Environment and Livelihoods: The Changing Situation and Trans-boundary Implications' brought together 160 participants consisting of representatives of Vietnamese authorities from southern Vietnam, academics and civil society organizations from all Mekong countries, and international civil society groups. The event was organized by the Can Tho People's Committee, Can Tho University and the Vietnam Rivers Network, with support from the Save the Mekong Coalition, Oxfam Australia and TERRA.

---

**Nguy Thi Khanh**, Center for Water Resources Conservation and Development (WARECOD) Tel: 84 4 22 451 228. Fax: 84 4 37 730 828 Cellphone: 0912713229

**Premrudee Daoroung**, Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA) Tel. +66 81-4342334; email: [fer@terraper.org](mailto:fer@terraper.org) ; [www.terraper.org](http://www.terraper.org)

**Carl Middleton**, International Rivers, Tel: +66 (0) 84-6815332; email: [carl@internationalrivers.org](mailto:carl@internationalrivers.org); [www.internationalrivers.org](http://www.internationalrivers.org)

More information on the Save the Mekong initiative and government-backed plans to dam the Mekong is available in English, Burmese, Chinese, Khmer, Lao, Thai and Vietnamese on the coalition's web site [www.SavetheMekong.org](http://www.SavetheMekong.org).