

CHILE DAM OPPONENTS: THE LOOTING OF PATAGONIA HAS BEGUN

Contributed by Benjamin Witte
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Energy companies closing in on Aysen's Baker River
 Photo courtesy of CCARV

Activists in southern Chile's sparsely-populated Region XI (Aysén), alarmed by what they describe as the planned "looting" of the area's pristine waterways, are clamoring for local and regional authorities to at least acknowledge what's taking place.

Aysén, home to some of the country's most pristine wilderness, also boasts an abundance of powerful, glacier-fed rivers. A potential windfall of hydroelectric energy, those rivers are more and more attracting the attention of large energy companies. Indeed, utility giants Endesa and Colbún have already shared plans to dam the region's two largest rivers: the Baker and the Pascua. Their so-called Aysén Project, if approved by the government, will be the largest hydroelectric venture in the country's history.

The Project has drawn a host of local, national and international critics, who say it threatens the region both socially and environmentally. Not only does the plan involve flooding approximately 93 square kilometers of wilderness, but it also calls for building a 2,000-kilometer transmission line — the World's longest — that would literally cut through acres upon acres of both protected and unprotected wilderness area.

But as worrisome as the Aysén Project is, the worst may be yet to come, say groups like the broad-based Citizen Coalition for Aysén Life Reserve (CCARV). Of particular concern is a corporation called Sur Electricidad y Energía S.A., which in the past two months has petitioned for a flurry of area water rights. Since June 15, the company has filed for water rights along the Cisnes, Cáceres, Vlanco, Norte, Cajón, Ñireguao, Pangal, Figueroa, Planea, Bravo, Ibáñez, Los Ñadis, Mayer and the Baker Rivers. The US\$ 4 billion Aysén Project, in other words, may be just the tip of the iceberg, warns the CCARV.

"We're concerned about how this particular company wants to get into the huge (hydroelectricity) business that already involves Endesa, Colbún, Xstrata and AES Gener," said CCARV representative Peter Hartmann in a recent press release. "They know that if the transmission line for the Baker and Pascua dams gets built, the path will be clear for the continued destruction of all of our rivers. Today we can clearly see that the attempt to loot Patagonia has already begun."

Also troublesome for Hartmann and his allies in the fight to protect Aysén's rivers is how absolutely silent local and regional authorities have been. Even as the issue has attracted attention as far away as the United States — where environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council have been campaigning to save Patagonia's rivers — elected officials in Region XI itself have remained more or less mute.

"What the people want from these political authorities is for them, at the very least, to make some sort of statement on the matter," said Hartmann, a resident of Coyhaique.

Instead the debate has for the most part pitted company representatives, people like Colbún President Bernardo Matte, against local residents and environmentalists. The two sides share very different visions of Chile's energy priorities and development strategy.

Backers of plans to tap Aysén's hydroelectric resources say projects like the Endesa-Colbun venture — which promises to generate some 2,400 MW of electricity — are absolutely vital for Chile's continued economic success. They're especially important given the country's growing appetite for electricity (up approximately 6 percent annually), and its current vulnerability vis-à-vis ongoing shortages of Argentine natural gas, used here for electricity production. Unlike Argentine natural gas, Patagonia's powerful rivers are Chilean, and therefore not subject to the whims of a foreign government. They also represent a clean and renewable source of energy, argue proponents.

Critics of the dam projects couldn't disagree more. Before following the lead of private, multi-national companies that — at the expense of the environment — look to reap huge profits from Chile's natural resources, Chilean policy makers ought first to consider energy alternatives, argue environmentalists like Juan Pablo Orrego of the Santiago-based organizations Ecosistemas.

“There’s wind power, and solar power as well. Right now they say these (alternatives) are prohibitively expensive. But what’s happening is that the cost-benefit equations currently being used don’t take into account environmental impact, and environmental, social and cultural costs,” Orrego told the Patagonia Times in a recent interview.

“Chile is stuck in a primary productive stage. It has been really since the Spanish first came here,” he added. “We see this as a dead-end alley, with phenomenal social, cultural and environmental costs. (The Aysén Project) is also designed in this perspective. In fact, the plan is to bring all the energy, 100 percent of it, to Santiago and the north. That’s the plan. I’m not speculating here. A 2,000-kilometer transmission line that crosses seven Regions and brings a continuous supply of energy to be used basically by Santiago’s industrial sector and by the mines north of Santiago.”

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