

Dams threaten livelihoods on the Panama Canal

Submitted by: Panama Canal West Basin Committee for Peasant Rights

Key players

Panama Canal West Basin Committee for Peasant Rights and other local groups

Time will tell whether the Government of Panama's plan to launch an initiative to study the possibility of building 3 dams in the west basin of the Panama Canal will happen. The dams will catch more water in the watershed and channel it into the canal. This push to expand the canal started in 1999 and is culminating this year in a referendum among the Panamanian people. The Panama Canal West Basin Committee for Peasants Rights has formed in response to the expansion and other concerned local groups have launched a campaign against the dams and hope to pressurise the government to find an alternative.

The canal is the life blood of the Panamanian peoples; all communities live near rivers using the river for transport and communication. The canal is also used by ships travelling from the Pacific to the Atlantic most of which have increased in size since 100 years ago when the Canal was first being used by traders. The increased size of ship means more water is needed in the canal therefore the canal locks will have to be increased. 40% of commerce for Ecuador, Chile and Peru passes through the canal every year. The increased size of ship means more water is needed in the canal, therefore locks need to be increased.

Dams will solve the problem for the big ships but will be the beginning of many problems for local communities and the environment alike. The proposed dams would flood 12,000 hectares. Communities that would be displaced are unlikely to receive adequate compensation for their land and homes. Significant areas of endemic flora and fauna would also be destroyed including some tropical rainforest in the middle of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, a world heritage site.

Communities are united in their anger about the project. Some in particular are angry about how the consultations have taken place.

The Panama Canal West Basin Peasants Committee and other local groups are trying to lobby authorities to look at alternative ways to allow for expansion of the canal and minimise impact in local communities for example increasing the amount of recycled water that is in the Canal.

For more information

ecobiosfera2003@yahoo.com

FAN-Central America www.freshwateraction.net/fan-ca

Grupo para la Educación y el Manejo Ambiental Sostenible (GEMAS): cepsai@cwpanama.net

Círculo de Estudios Científicos Aplicados (CECA): cecapanama@hotmail.com

