

China Moves to Dam the Nu, Ignoring Seismic, Ecological, and Social Risks

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In a blueprint for the energy sector in 2011-15, China's State Council on Wednesday lifted an eight-year ban on five megadams for the largely free-flowing Nu [Salween] River, ignoring concerns about geologic risks, global biodiversity, resettlement, and impacts on downstream communities.

"China's plans to go ahead with [dams on the Nu](#), as well as similar projects on the Upper Yangtze and Mekong, shows a complete disregard of well-documented seismic hazards, ecological and social risks" stated Katy Yan, China Program Coordinator for the environmental organization International Rivers. Also included in the plan is the controversial [Xiaonanhai Dam](#) on the Upper Yangtze.

A total of 13 dams was first proposed for the Nu River (also known as the Salween) in 2003, but Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao suspended these plans in 2004 in a stunning decision. Since then, Huadian Corporation has continued to explore five dams – Songta (4200 MW), Maji (4200 MW), Yabiluo (1800 MW), Liuku (180 MW), and Saige (1000 MW) – and has successfully lobbied the State Council to include them in the 12th Five Year Plan.

In particular, the State Council's [notice](#), published on January 23, states that construction on Songta Dam, the northern-most dam in this cascade and the only one located in Tibet, should proceed during the 2011-15 period, while the other four would undergo orderly preparation. Both the Songta and Maji dams border the Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas, a World Heritage Site renowned for being home to 7,000 plant species and 80 species of rare or endangered animals. According to UNESCO, the site is believed to support over 25% of the world's and 50% of China's animal species. Based on eye-witness accounts, site preparatory work for both dams has begun. Resettlement has already occurred at the site of Liuku Dam, and the unsatisfactory process has been well-documented by the Beijing-based organization Green Earth Volunteers.

All five dams are situated in one of China's most seismically active and geologically unstable zones. Senior geologists in China have repeatedly [warned](#) about the risks of seismic activity and extreme climatic events on dam building in the region, including the potential for a domino effect of dam failures should an upper dam collapse during an earthquake or extreme flood event.

These concerns are echoed by civil society groups in Burma and Thailand, who fear the cumulative impact that these dams on the Nu/Salween could have on downstream communities and ecosystems. Thus far, a cumulative impact assessment for all dams in the Salween basin has not been conducted.

International Rivers calls on the Chinese government to respect public opposition by upholding the stay on dam building on the Nu River, and on UNESCO to remind China of its obligation to protect the Three Parallel Rivers area under the World Heritage Convention.

More information:

- [Notice for the 12th Five Year Energy Development Plan \(in Chinese\)](#)
- [Nu/Salween Basin Fact Sheet](#)
- [Map of seismic hotspots in the Nu River Valley](#)
- [Map of the World Heritage Site and dams in the Nu River Valley](#)
- [Spreadsheet of major dams in China](#)
- [Field visit report to the Nu River](#)

International Rivers is an environmental and human rights organization with staff in four continents. For over two decades, we have been at the heart of the global struggle to protect rivers and the rights of communities that depend on them.

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