

NAME OF THE PROCESS: Barragem do Sabor

Nº: 2003/4523

DATA: 22 April 2003.

Brief chronological summary

1996

The Portuguese government announces its decision to go ahead with a river dam at the Sabor river, following a previous withdrawal from the Baixo Côa River, where some pre-historical paintings made the location inappropriate for the dam.

1999

The EIA study for the Hydroelectric Power Station is released. This document recognises the unique characteristics in terms of fauna, flora and landscape of the Sabor Valley, and asks for the withdrawal of the government proposal.

2000

The EIA commission assumes the results of the study and withdraws the project. It claims building the dam will permanently deteriorate an unique N2000 site, and also that no alternatives have been considered when choosing the Sabor Valley for building the power-station.

The ministry of environment says it will be necessary to carry out another study that takes alternatives into account before making any final decision.

The alternative chosen by a new report is the construction of a series of minor dams at the high course of the Côa river, which would be associated to minor environmental impacts. This alternative site would require higher economical investments and will produce less energy than the Sabor dam.

More than 350 scientists, university professors and government officials sign a manifesto against the Sabor river dam.

2003

A new EIA comparing the two different options: Baixo Sabor and Alto Côa, is published.

ICN, the statutory environmental agency, publishes a report that claims the Sabor option would clearly be an illegal choice, now that the Alto Côa has been identified as a better option in terms of environmental impacts to N2000 sites.

The Sabor Livre platform files a EU complaint (2003/4523, SG(2003) A/4598), where it informs the EU about the threats affecting the Sabor valley, in case the Portuguese government decides not to listen to its own statutory agency (ICN) and go ahead with the project.

June 2004

Arlindo Cunha, Ministry of Environment (PSD, social-democrat party) approves the hydroelectric power-station at the Sabor river, therefore going against the ICN's report. In its justification it is not mentioned why the alternative of the Coa River is not longer an option.

February 2005

New complaint sent to the EU authorities by the Plataforma Sabor Livre.

In this new letter, the Platform claims the Portuguese government would violate the EU common market/competition laws, as it would support a private company through EU funding to build the Sabor river dam, allowing the beneficiary, Electricidade de Portugal, EDP, to obtain economic benefits from an investment not directly paid by them.

June 2005

The European Commission sends to the Portuguese government a letter of formal notice in the framework of the procedure laid down by article 226 of the EU treaty.

The EU commission says the Portuguese government is breaking EU laws by allowing serious environmental impacts on an outstanding area, which is classified as N2000.

November 2005

EU commission opens an infringement procedure against the Portuguese government after their refusal to accept the claims made by the EU. The Portuguese authorities said EU's arguments were "not valid". EU environment commissioner says Lisbon has failed to fulfil its obligations by allowing a project that has clearly an alternative option and that seriously threatens a very well preserved and protected site.

December 2005

The Portuguese government answers the EU and says the Sabor project has "vital strategic interest for the nation". It also announces the dam will be done even without EU funding.

According to their own data, financing the dam would cost more than 161 millions of euros, besides, the private contractor, EDP, has publicly said they will never finance the total cost of the dam, arguing it wouldn't be profitable for them. They assume they can cover up to 50% of the building costs.

January 2006

A new letter is sent by the Plataforma Sabor Livre to the EU authorities, inquiring about any recent news related to this case.

Paralell to this, an following the approval of the process by the Government through the Environmental Assesment Committee (DIA), (see June 2004) , a new document is prepared (Projecto Base and RECAPE) which establishes the conditions under the dam could be built

February 2006

EU commission meets the Portuguese government. After the meeting, the EU authorities declare they need more data about the project, as they still don't feel the justifications presented by the Portuguese government are enough to authorise the building of this dam on an area classified as N2000.

September 2006

The commission still waits for an official reply by the Portuguese authorities.

October 2006

The 11th of October, a briefing by SPEA/BirdLife International about the Sabor River case is given to Mr Thebault, from Mr. Barroso's Cabinet.

On the 20th of October, the association of Pro-Dam municipalities of the Sabor River sends a letter to the President of the EU Commission, Mr. Barroso and to Energy Commissioner, Mr Piebalgs, and Regional Policy, Mrs. Hubner. They claim the vital importance of the Dam for their regions development and uses the argument of fight against desertification to defend the dam. This argument had never been used before.

The Sabor River Platform sends a press release claiming this information is mischievous, and that no major dams can be seen as instruments of desertification control.

November 2006

The Portuguese Government reaffirms its intention to build the dam, but continues to reject any possibilities of self-funding, putting all pressure in the EU authorities to pay the costs of it.

On the 7th of November a letter is sent and signed by 17 out of the 24 Portuguese European MPs to the Environment Commissioner, Mr. Dimas, asking for the approval of the Dam, claiming that the construction of this is of "vital importance for the nations strategy".

On the 9th of November SPEA sends a new press release alerting to the previous two condemnations announced by the EU Commission against Portugal, they were both announced during 2006 and are both related to the breaking of the Habitats and Birds Directives. Continuing plans to build the dam could therefore mean Portugal's third condemnation in less that a year's period.

On 10th of November a new letter by the Sabor River Platform is sent to the Juridical Department of the EU Commission to take a stance on the legality of the construction of “Baixo Sabor” dam.

The RECAPE, document that resumes the conditions under which the proposed project can be approved according to Portuguese law, is released. In this new document, a list of studies and actions are asked to the promoters in case they still want to go ahead with the project. This RECAPE has a public-consultation process during which both the Sabor River Platform and SPEA send their allegations.

Contacts:

Iván Ramírez, IBA and Marine Departments Coordinator, Sociedade Portuguesa para o Estudo das Aves, SPEA, BirdLife International in Portugal.

Tel: 00351 213 220 430 Email: ivan.ramirez@spea.pt

Konstantin Kreiser, EU Policy Manager, BirdLife International European Division.

Tel : 0032 22800830 Email : konstantin.kreiser@birdlifeeco.net