



# MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

31 March 2014

To: Daniel A. Clune, U.S. Ambassador to Laos  
William E. Todd, U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Cambodia  
David B. Shear, U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam  
Kristie A. Kenney, U.S. Ambassador to the Royal Kingdom of Thailand:

The purpose of this letter is to alert you about the threat of hydropower dam construction to the critically endangered freshwater dolphins in the Mekong River. The Marine Mammal Commission (MMC), an independent U.S. agency, consists of three presidentially-appointed Commissioners and a nine-member Committee of Scientific Advisors with expertise in the fields of marine ecology and marine mammal affairs. The MMC's mandate includes a responsibility to "encourage the development of international arrangements for research on, and conservation of, all marine mammals." The MMC is very concerned about upcoming decisions that may drive these dolphins to extinction.

For the last several years, the MMC has worked with IUCN to provide technical support to the Government of Cambodia and WWF-Cambodia as they try to prevent extinction of the small endemic population of Irrawaddy dolphins in the Mekong River. Although now numbering only about 80 animals, the population was once much larger and had a much more extensive range within the Mekong basin, from Vietnam, into Tonle Sap in Cambodia and all the way upriver into Laos. Their range included several major Mekong tributaries. Today the dolphins occur only in a 190-km segment of the Mekong mainstem between the deep transboundary pool on the Lao-Cambodia border and Kampi Pool, near Kratie, Cambodia. The MMC has been assisting local researchers and managers as they seek to identify and address immediate direct threats to the dolphins, the most notable of which is entanglement in fishing gear. This letter, however, addresses the impending greater threat from hydropower dam construction.

The MMC is convinced, for the reasons given in the next paragraph, that construction of the proposed Don Sahong dam would have a catastrophic impact on Mekong dolphins, which are IUCN red-listed as Critically Endangered. We understand that the dam is nearing approval and therefore urgently request that you seek means for obtaining deferral of any final decision until an internationally transparent environmental impact assessment that includes explicit consideration for the potential impacts on the dolphins has been completed. As you are aware, there is a lack of confidence in proposed measures to create alternative fish passage structures, and the adequacy of existing environmental impact studies has been called into question. Also, should a decision be made to proceed with construction, it is essential that mitigation measures be established and designed in consultation with experts on river dolphin ecology and population dynamics.

The proposed project site is at the current northern end of Mekong dolphin habitat, a mere kilometer upstream of the aforementioned transboundary pool that supports the last few individuals in Laos. A recent report by WWF shows that construction activities and the increased boat traffic

associated with dam construction will likely extirpate this group of dolphins.<sup>1</sup> In addition, there is high risk that the entire dolphin population downstream of the Don Sahong dam will be pushed to extinction due to changes in water flow and sediment load and the impacts on dolphin prey resulting from disruption or blockage of fish migration channels. These channels are essential to the health and survival of major migratory fish populations in the Mekong, which, apart from their importance to the dolphins, are a vital source of food security to human communities in the region. International concerns about human food security and Mekong dolphin food security go hand in hand.

On the eve of the Second Mekong River Commission Summit, I ask that you make the MMC's interest and concerns known to members of the Mekong River Commission (Commission). Also, please use this information to support efforts to ensure that the governments of the Mekong countries and the Commission give serious consideration to Mekong River dolphins in their deliberations and advice concerning the proposed Don Sahong dam. Please do not hesitate to request the use of the expertise and other support that the MMC stands ready to provide.

Sincerely



Rebecca J. Lent, Ph.D.  
Executive Director

One Attachment

Cc:

Kerri-Ann Jones: Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, U.S. Department of State

Daniel R. Russel: Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs, U.S. Department of State

Michael Yates: Mission Director, Regional Development Mission for Asia, USAID

Rebecca Black: Mission Director, USAID Cambodia

Joakim Parker: Mission Director, USAID Vietnam

Mr. Hans Guttman: Chief Executive Officer, Mekong River Commission Secretariat

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<sup>1</sup> [http://awsassets.panda.org/downloads/donsahong\\_dolphin\\_lr\\_feb2014.pdf](http://awsassets.panda.org/downloads/donsahong_dolphin_lr_feb2014.pdf)