

Massive hydroelectric project faces test in Chile

May 9 2011, by Roser Toll



Electricity towers such as these in Santiago in 2008 will work with a new hydroelectric power system to help meet Chile's growing energy needs. Chile's \$3.2 billion hydroelectric project -- seen as a key to new development in the South American nation but questioned for its environmental impact -- faces a key test this week.

A \$3.2 billion hydroelectric project billed as key to satisfying Chile's growing energy needs faces a major hurdle Monday as an environmental panel decides whether or not to give it the green light.

The HidroAysen project would see the construction of five hydroelectric power stations, two along the Baker River and three on the Pascua River, in an area some 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles south of Santiago).

Under consideration for 50 years, it would generate 2.75 [gigawatts](#) of

electricity -- or 20 percent of current capacity -- to help meet Chile's energy needs, which are expected to increase 80 percent by 2025.

Approval by the regional environmental panel is widely expected despite stiff opposition from green activists seeking to protect the Patagonia region.

The paths used for some 2,000 kilometers (1,200 miles) of power cables and towers would still be subject to a separate environmental review and could require another \$4.0 billion dollars in investment.

A coalition called "Chilean Patagonia Without Dams" contends the project is unnecessary and would endanger pristine forests in a region that includes widely admired [glaciers](#) and lakes.

The opponents claim that the project would disfigure [wilderness areas](#) of Patagonia, with the flooding of some 5,900 hectares (14,000 acres).

They argue that the energy would be used mainly for the mining sector, that the environmental review has been inadequate, and that Chile would do better with less damaging [energy sources](#) such as solar and wind.

One poll in April showed 61 percent of Chileans opposed the project, but the consortium of Chile's Endesa and the Spanish firm Colbun SA has launched its own public relations effort, claiming the project would produce clean, renewable energy that would reduce demand for imported [fossil fuels](#).

Opponents plan marches against the project and may file appeals if it wins approval, a spokesman said.

But President Sebastian Pinera said the country, which is seeing economic growth estimated at 6.5 percent and has had to ration

electricity, has few better alternatives, especially with nuclear power being reconsidered in the wake of the disaster in Japan.

"If HidroAysen is approved it would be 100 percent in compliance with environmental legislation," Pinera said over the weekend. "If we don't have hydroelectric [energy](#), there will be more coal-fired power plants."

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