

Mekong levels at lowest on record as drought and dams strangle river

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Experts say the Mekong river is at a "crisis point"

The once-mighty Mekong river has been reduced to a thin, grubby neck of water in stretches of northern Thailand—record lows blamed on drought and a recently completed dam far upstream.

The \$4.47 billion Thai-owned Xayaburi hydro-electric power plant went into operation this week in Laos after years of warnings over the potential impact on fish flow, sediment and water levels on a river which feeds tens of millions.

Along parts of Thailand's northeastern border at Loei, the kilometre-wide (3,300-foot) river has shrivelled to a few dozen metres, with boulders and bedrock encasing muddy pools of water.

From above, the encroaching banks of Laos and Thailand are now a thread of water apart, restricting fishing grounds to a slim channel.

Fishermen blame a combination of this year's weak monsoon and the Xayaburi dam, around 300 kilometres (185 miles) to the north.

"I don't want any more dam construction," said fisherman Sup Aunkaew, who tossed a meagre catch into his boat, adding that the fish spawning habits have been "confused" by the unseasonally low water levels.

"But we can't really oppose their plans if they want to do it."

Landlocked and impoverished Laos has set its sights on becoming "the battery of Asia", with 44 operating hydro plants and 46 more under construction many on key tributaries of the Mekong, according to monitor International Rivers.



Along parts of the northeastern Thai border, the river has shrivelled to a few dozen metres in width

The Mekong River Commission (MRC), a body governing regional water diplomacy, said the water levels from June to October are the lowest in nearly 30 years.

In Nong Khai, which faces the Laos' capital Vientiane, the water dropped to around one metre (3.2 feet) on Tuesday, several times shallower than average, the MCR said.

Measurements across the river "are significantly below the minimum levels for this time of year and are expected to decrease further", it said in a statement to AFP.

"The concern is for the upcoming dry season."

'Death of a thousand cuts'

Experts say the dam-building frenzy in China and Laos has compounded the drought.

"These are causing the Mekong to die a death of a thousand cuts," said Brian Eyster, author of "The Last Days of the Mighty Mekong".

He said the lower part of the river is at a "crisis point" until rains come again next year.



The Mekong sustains tens of millions of people along its banks through fishing

and agriculture

The Mekong, which rises on the Tibetan plateau and courses through China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam—sustains tens of millions of people along its banks through fishing and agriculture.

The 1,285-megawatt Xayaburi dam was built by CKPower—a subsidiary of the Thai builder and majority shareholder CH Karnchang—which went ahead with construction despite protests in Thailand, which is buying most of the electricity.



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As it began operations the company plastered Thai newspapers with advertising this week referring to the "greatness of the Mekong" and calling the dam "fish friendly".

It did not respond to several requests for comment but the company has trumpeted its commitment to clean, sustainable energy.

In July the dam operator denied tests on the mega-structure were responsible for the river drying up downstream in northeastern Thailand.

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