NEWS ADVISORY

Lao PDR to host international fishway conference next week

VIENTIANE (Nov 8, 2016) – The Lao Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is scheduled to host an international conference next week to discuss innovative approaches to securing regional fisheries productivity as irrigation and other river development projects expand. Held in partnership with the National University of Laos, the Lower Mekong Fish Passage Conference in Vientiane from November 14 to 17 is bringing together more than 150 experts to discuss how applied research can be used to enhance policy and decision-making across the region.

Drawn from the public and private sectors as well as academic institutions, the experts in river development, fish passage and aquatic ecosystem management are mainly from Australia and the United States but also Europe, South America and the neighbouring countries of Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam as well as Indonesia.

'Effective fish passage to maintain the fisheries resource for generations to come'

"The region is currently experiencing an unprecedented boom in river development projects which will increase agricultural and power generation output for years to come," said Dr Bounthong Bouahom, director-general of the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI).

"It is important that our development activities do not impact our most important food source, fish," Dr Bounthong said. "Mekong fish species are highly migratory, requiring access to different habitats at many life stages.

"As governments, we need to produce power and supply water to our communities. But at the same time, we must ensure effective fish passage to maintain the fisheries resource for generations to come."

The four-day conference is being hosted by the Living Aquatic Resources Research Centre (LARReC), NAFRI and the Lao Ministry of Agriculture and

Forestry, with the support of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

ACIAR has long been involved in Lao fishway research. In April, the Australian government agency launched a five-year project to quantify biophysical and community impacts of improved fish passage. This is among the largest ACIAR fisheries projects since it began supporting research in the sector in 1997. It is also the fifth ACIAR project in a series to find the most appropriate technology to boost Lao fisheries production where barriers to fish migration have been built.

During the conference, USAID is sponsoring a dialogue seminar aimed at agreeing on an approach to develop national guidelines for monitoring fish passage at mainstream dams along the Mekong River. The discussion, to be held on a strictly invite-only basis, is expected to involve fisheries and other international experts as well as representatives of the Lao energy, fisheries and natural resource management sectors.

The conference is by invitation from the Lao government and primarily aims to bring together government agencies, developers, researchers, local provincial and district leaders and natural resource managers to help share knowledge on the successes and opportunities regarding fisheries sustainability in the region.

LARReC and NAFRI are organising the conference with Charles Sturt University in Australia and the United States Department of the Interior. Other partners are the New South Wales Department of Primary Industries in Australia, National University of Laos and the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in the United States.

Background

Current hydropower output in the Lower Mekong Basin (3,325 MW) is expected to rise at an annual rate of 7 percent over the next two decades with 134 new dams. Irrigation networks are expected to expand by more than 250 percent over the same period. These projects challenge the long-term sustainability of the world's most productive inland fishery, which amounts to 2 percent of the global fisheries yield while contributing more than 50 percent of the animal protein and supporting the livelihoods of close to 70 million people in the basin. Similar development in the Amazon River in South America led to a 70 percent decrease in fisheries production. In the United States, the Columbia River salmon fishery crashed following dam construction, requiring investment of $7 billion from hydropower profits into applied research to partly restore fisheries over 50 years.

Such experience shows that it is always cheaper and more effective to consider technology to reduce fisheries impacts at the time of construction rather than after completion. The key is using robust science to identify, evaluate and mitigate the effects of river development. Without effective mitigation strategies, capture fisheries in the Lower Mekong Basin are therefore also expected to decline substantially, affecting a major source of animal protein and income.

ACIAR has supported a program of work that has achieved substantial fish-passage outcomes in Lao PDR. For over ten years, research teams have been working to improve the compatibility of river infrastructure like weirs and irrigation gates with maintenance of healthy fisheries. Work has combined Mekong fish ecology with hydraulic engineering to develop a range of fish-passage solutions at low-level weirs that are currently being rolled out across the region.

The Department of the Interior is also promoting sound social and environmental safeguards for hydropower-related infrastructure and associated activities in the region through the Smart Infrastructure for the Mekong (SIM) Program. Announced in 2013, the SIM Program is an implementation tool of the long-term Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), a partnership among Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, Viet Nam and the United States launched in 2009.

For further information, please contact:

Living Aquatic Resources Research Centre (LARReC)
Mr Doungkham Singhanouvong
Deputy Director
Tel: 856-20-55-312-216 Email: douangkhams@gmail.com

Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR)
Dr Chris Barlow
Fisheries Program Manager
Tel: 61-2-6217-0508 Email: chris.barlow@aciar.gov.au

United States Department of the Interior
Dr Michael Roy,
Senior Technical Adviser, Smart Infrastructure for the Mekong (SIM) Program
Tel: 1-503-601-9690 Email: michaelroy.doi.sim@gmail.com

Mekong Fishways conference Flickr account
https://www.flickr.com/photos/145842600@N02/