

Just Say No to Hydro-Quebec

On Friday, the Vermont Public Service Board will decide whether or not to sign a contract to buy electricity from the Canadian government's Hydro-Quebec project. Middlebury College must voice its opposition to the idea in no uncertain terms.

Until recently, most people thought that hydro-electric power was the answer to many of our energy problems. It's clean. It's safe. And it's not exhaustible.

But large hydro-electric projects do have devastating environmental consequences. Daming or diverting a river means flooding vast tracts of land and destroying fragile ecosystems.

In fact, in some ways, hydro-electric power is the most environmentally destructive form of energy in the world. A coal burning plant pollutes the air, but at least it can be shut down. A dam is forever, and the destruction it causes is irreversible.

The Hydro-Quebec project is located near James Bay in northern Canada. The first phase of the project, begun in the mid-1970's, involved damming and completely diverting several rivers which emptied into the Bay. Originally touted by the Canadian government as a quantum leap forward in energy technology, many people now see the project as a colossal failure and a tragedy.

- Some four thousand square miles of land were flooded.
- Mercury in the water rose to toxic levels and poisoned the fish, a basic food staple of the 10,000 Cree Indians who live near the Bay.
- The increased concentration of water has affected snow and rainfall patterns in the region.
- The flooded area is a critical resting point and breeding ground for migratory birds. Their migration patterns have been put at risk.
- The largest free ranging herd of caribou in the world roams through the James Bay area several times a year. In 1984, 10,000 were killed crossing a river which had a water level that was severely above its normal level due to a dam downstream.

Phase One has not yet been completed. The Canadian government now wants to begin a second phase to sell power to New England and New York State. Phase Two will make Hydro-Quebec the biggest hydro-electric power project in the world. If the project goes through, another four thousand square miles of land will be flooded. That means that the total land mass flooded for Hydro-Quebec will roughly equal the state of Vermont.

Signing a contract with Hydro-Quebec would be a poor energy policy for Vermont. Over the next twenty-five years, the contract could cost Vermont as much as \$6 billion. That money should be used for energy projects here in Vermont. By investing in cogeneration, woodchip burning operations and small scale hydro projects here at home, the state could create jobs and make Vermont less dependent on outside sources of energy.

The Middlebury College trustees should issue a statement categorically opposing a contract with Hydro-Quebec. As one of the largest and most important institutions in the state, the college could have a real impact on the Public Service Board's decision. Middlebury could also gain national recognition as an environmentally conscious educational institution.

A poll conducted in early May by the Quebec English newspaper *This Week in Business* found that 87 percent of Quebecois oppose Phase II of Hydro-Quebec.

The state of Maine refused to sign a contract with Hydro-Quebec.

Vermont should too.

Middlebury College hosted a highly publicized conference on ethics and the environment. We have no business accepting power from Hydro-Quebec, and we must not sit on our hands and let it happen.

The Campus is currently looking for students interested