



# NEWS RELEASE

FROM

## SUE DOUGHTY

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**4 pages**

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<p><b>PARLIAMENTARY MOTION BACKS ICELANDIC ENVIRONMENTALISTS' CALL FOR INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT OVER ILLEGAL DAM PROJECT</b></p>
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**Sue Doughty MP has tabled a Parliamentary motion calling on the British Government to use its diplomatic links with Iceland to persuade the Icelandic Government to terminate the building of a series of dams in the Icelandic Highlands.**

**The Liberal Democrat Shadow Environment Minister and member of the influential Environmental Audit Select Committee has given her backing to campaigners in Iceland calling for international support in their opposition to the building of the dams, which will have a devastating effect on the Icelandic wilderness.**

**Sue said:**

“Iceland has a stunningly beautiful highland wilderness and a proud independent tradition, both of which are in danger of being undermined by the encroachment of powerful multinational companies.

“The dams are not only an environmental disaster, but the whole project is beset by serious concerns about safety, financial integrity and even its legality. We’ve all heard similar stories about projects in parts of the developing world where there are concerns about democratic accountability, but you do not expect this from one of the most advanced countries in the world like Iceland.

“The final decision on whether to continue construction of the dams is of course for Iceland to make. But the Icelandic government must be aware that the world is watching and that they should not be surprised to find that their international relations suffer if they do not take their environmental obligations seriously.”

**ENDS**

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## Notes to Editors

- The full Early Day Motion number 883, tabled by Sue Doughty MP, is given below and can also be found, along with the most current list of MPs who have supported it, through the following link: <http://edm.hclibrary.parliament.uk/edmdata/html/motion.html/ref=883>

### “Destruction of the Icelandic Highlands

That this House is seriously concerned at the construction of a series of dams at Karahnjúkar in the Icelandic highlands, one of Europe’s last unspoilt wildernesses, to power an aluminium smelting plant for the US multinational Alcoa;

notes that Iceland's National Planning Agency rejected the project on the grounds of substantial, irreversible negative environmental impact;

that an Icelandic court has ruled that the Environmental Impact Assessment submitted with the planning application for the Alcoa smelter is invalid;

that the dam is being built on a seismic fault with significant risk to local populations; and that the build up of silt will result in dust storms damaging farmland and feeding grounds for reindeer and many bird species;

further notes that the principle subcontractor, Impregilo, is facing corruption charges in Africa; regrets the decision of Barclays to provide a loan of \$400 million for the project in breach of the Equator Principles which demand sound environmental practices as a financial prerequisite;

draws attention to plans to build dams in Thjorsarver, despite being protected by the RAMSAR Treaty, and in Langisjor, Skjalfandaflljot and Skagafjordur region;

supports the Icelandic independent campaigners who have requested international assistance for the domestic opposition to the projects;

and calls on the Government to use its political and diplomatic links with the Icelandic Government to encourage them to terminate the Karahnjúkar project and those at similar sites threatened by heavy industry so that the Icelandic Highlands are protected for the enjoyment of future generations of Icelanders and their visitors.”

- Environmental facts and figures of the Kárahnjúkar project**

The building of a gigantic hydropower station is planned on the northern edge of Europe’s largest glacier, Vatnajökull in Iceland. The power station will be for the provision of 770 Megawatts for an aluminium smelter being planned by Alcoa in Eastern Iceland, with a capacity of 370,000 metric tons per year. In order for this power capacity to be delivered, one of Iceland's largest glacial river will have to be diverted into another large glacial river, and huge reservoirs will be required in order to maintain the power capacity required throughout the year. The facts and figures of this planned massive intervention in this unspoilt wilderness area are as follows:

- Reservoirs: the largest (Hálslón) will flood 57 square km of land, and further smaller reservoirs will submerge another 10 square km.
- Dams: the biggest one, in the canyon at Kárahnjúkar, will be 190m high and 770m long; 3 medium-sized dams are collectively 32m high and 1000m long. Additional smaller dams will be built.
- The water will be diverted to the turbines through a 70 km long tunnel/gallery.
- The 150 km long glacial river, Jökulsá á Dal, which has carved out for itself one of the deepest and most attractive canyons in Europe (Dimmugljúfur Canyon, 15 km long - 200 m deep), will be converted to an insignificant stream.
- The diversion of the waters into another glacial river will result in immense changes to the Lagarfljót glacial river (140 km long). Its natural drainage will have to be artificially enlarged and the huge estuary delta will have to be reconstructed.

- Altogether, 3,000 square km or 3% of Iceland's total landmass will be affected by this irreversible intervention in the environment. The area affected, where the natural environment and habitats will be destroyed, extends from the edge of the Vatnajökull Glacier to the estuary of the Héraðsflói glacial river.
- A total of 40 square km of land now covered with vegetation will be submerged forever. Soil erosion in the central highlands is one of the greatest environmental problems Iceland has to cope with. It must be feared that the planned reservoirs, where the deposits carried by the glacial rivers will end up (some 10 million metric tons per year), poses an erosion danger when the water level in the reservoirs sink. Yearly water level fluctuations of the Háslón reservoir are 75 m and up to 3/4 of the reservoir will be exposed to wind erosion. This will occur in winter and spring, when the water reserves will be drawn on. This is the time of year of the wildest storms and even more vegetation will be threatened and covered by the masses of sand and dust carried by violent winds. The effected area of soil erosion will be up to 400 square km.
- A unique former geothermal region with plant fossils will be flooded.
- Flora and fauna: The affected area is one of the few regions in Iceland where the soil and vegetation are still more or less intact. Opponents of the project point out that the project would have unforeseeable consequences for the water table.
- This part of Iceland is home to 1500-2000 reindeer (*Rangifer tarrandus*) whose summer pastures would be flooded. The total population of reindeer in Iceland is around 4000 animals.
- Some 400-600 female harbour seals (*Phoca vitulina vitulina*) breed every year on the Jökulsá á Dal delta. By redirecting the river the colony (3-4% of the Icelandic population) would be destroyed.
- The Kárahnjúkar project would affect two IBA's (BirdLife - Important Bird Areas). Among the bird species whose existence is threatened or would be affected by the changes which the project would bring are:
  - Red-throated Diver (*Gavia stellata*) - 220 pairs
  - Pink-footed Goose (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) - 3800 pairs affected
  - 570 nests would be flooded by the Háslón reservoir and 2200 pairs would in immediate danger.
  - 9-13.000 moulting geese in the Eyjabakkar IBA will be directly affected by the project.
  - Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*) - 2000 breeding pairs, 10.000 moulting birds affected
  - Pintail (*Anas acuta*) - 100 pairs; 20% of the total Icelandic population
  - Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) - 5 pairs, one of the rarest Icelandic duck species
  - Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*) - 27 pairs
  - Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) - 1000-2000 pairs
  - Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*) - over 700 pairs
  - Great Skua (*Stercorarius skua*) - 265 pairs, 5% of the total population
  - Arctic Skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) - some 1300 breeding pairs (possibly the world's largest breeding colony in Úthérað IBA)
- The RSPB have stated their support for the campaign against the dams. Their parliamentary unit has provided the following statement:

'The RSPB has been working, alongside BirdLife Iceland and others, to highlight the serious environmental damage likely to result from the hydropower developments proposed by the Government of Iceland. Iceland and the UK have shared responsibility for a number of bird species, notably the pink-footed goose; most of the world's pink-footed geese breed in Iceland and virtually all these birds winter in the UK in areas such as eastern Scotland and north Norfolk. Nicola Crockford, spokesperson for BirdLife International, said: "The Government of Iceland must honour its international conservation commitments, and look again at proposed developments which would undermine these commitments. The Kárahnjúkar dam proposal alone will adversely affect some 3% of the world population of pink-footed geese, and in a worst case scenario where all of the dam developments proceeded, the global population of this species could be halved in twenty years.'

- For further information on the campaign to save the Icelandic Highlands, please contact:
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- Further information can be found at the following websites:
  - <http://www.inca.is>
  - <http://natturuvaktin.com/english.htm>
  - <http://www.savingiceland.org/>
  - <http://www.oriononline.org/pages/om/04-2om/Swan.html> (an informative background to the Karahnjukar dams from Orion magazine)

Photographs of Karahnjukar for press use can be downloaded from:

- <http://www.inca.is/show>

Photographs can also be obtained from Panos Pictures, the number for which is 020 7234 0010