

Communities oppose Eastlink project

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By Sam Wainwright

BRISBANE — More than 500 people marched and rallied on January 24 against Eastlink, a \$1.2 billion project of the Queensland, NSW and federal governments to link the NSW and Queensland electricity grids with 1500 kilometres of high voltage power line.

Opposition has been organised by South East Queensland Against Eastlink (SEQAEL) and the northern NSW group Totally Opposing the Eastlink Grid (TOTA).

As well as involving environmentalists, the groups draw strongly on the rural communities that would be affected by the Eastlink route. More than 350 people came in buses from the southern Queensland town of Warwick, while dozens more drove from as far afield as Armidale. All of the rural shires from Armidale to north of Warwick are now publicly opposed to the proposal.

Eastlink will cut a swathe through farming land and threaten the Scenic Rim wilderness area. As part of the rally, a cluster of balloons was raised 45 metres into the air, the same height as the proposed powerlines and pylons.

Every speaker stressed that it is not just those living in Eastlink's path who stand to lose; electricity prices may rise and greenhouse gas emissions will increase.

Eastlink commits Queensland to meeting its future power needs through NSW's coal-fired power stations. Extra electricity will also have to be generated because of the significant loss incurred when it is moved over long distances.

A 1992 Senate inquiry cast strong doubts on the feasibility of a grid connection, suggesting instead that Queensland should implement sustainable electricity generating technologies.

TOTA and SEQAEL also believe that Eastlink is a part of the push to corporatise, and then privatise, electricity. A number of speakers pointed to the British and Victorian experiences to demonstrate how this produces higher prices and profit-driven power companies which have no interest in promoting energy conservation.

Eastlink also poses health risks. Foods would be grown under the path of the powerlines, and there is mounting evidence linking electromagnetic radiation to cancer.

SEQAEL member Bruce Boyes said: "We're not trying to put Eastlink into somebody else's backyard. We're saying it shouldn't go into anyone's backyard."

The rally called for a Senate inquiry into the project. A number of speakers urged people not to vote for either Labor or Liberal in the next state and federal elections, but to support parties and candidates who campaign against Eastlink and the privatisation of electricity generation and supply.

In another development, the credibility of the South East Queensland Electricity Board (SEQEB) has been undermined by the revelation that it has been stealing money from some of its poorest customers. According to the Community of Inala Legal Service, SEQEB has been illegally imposing a fee of between \$20 and \$57 on some customers threatened with disconnection.

[Contact SEQAEL on (074) 626 724 or TOTA, PO Box 243, Guyra NSW 2365. Ph (067) 750 112.]

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