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A Second Canal for Central America — or a Pipe Dream

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The Panama Canal may have competition. The Central American isthmus will be home to yet another transoceanic conduit slated for completion by 2019, according to a news brief from the PanAm Post.

Nicaragua's "Grand Canal" will be fully operational a year later, says Telemachus Talavera, a member of the Nicaraguan government's development committee. HKND, the Hong Kong-based development company that will build the canal, unveiled a newly government-sanctioned route that will, as in Panama, slice the country in half. "The so-called 'Route 4' includes two ports (Pacific and Caribbean), a free trade zone in Brito, a tourism resort in San Lorenzo, Boaco, an airport in Rivas, and a network of new roads to connect all sub-projects," PanAm reports. According to HKND, the canal will be "between 27.6 and 30 meters deep, 230 and 520 kilometers wide" — about 91 to 98 feet deep, 143 and 323 miles wide — "at its narrowest and widest points."

The Independent says it will span 173 miles in length and is being "billed as the biggest engineering project in human history." HKND has promised to employ more than 50,000 people in its construction, and once built, "the canal and side projects would bring more than 200,000 jobs" to

Nicaragua, writes Patrick Boehler for The South China Morning Post.

In a report compiled by Shipping Watch, a maritime news website, Keith Svendsen, head of operations for Danish shipping line Maersk, praised the potential canal's global-commerce benefits: it will have room for the world's largest container ships, some of which won't fit through Panama, "while also saving 800 kilometers on a journey from New York to Los Angeles."

But "others say the project is not economically feasible," Mr. Boehler writes. The Nicaraguan lawmaker Eliseo Nunez, who opposes construction, called HKND's announcement "a propaganda game, a media show to continue generating false hopes of future prosperity among Nicaraguans."

Greg Miller, writing for Wired, is also skeptical of Grand Canal fanfare. "How HKND — apparently the only company to submit a bid — managed to land the deal, isn't clear, leaving many Nicaraguans frustrated by their government's lack of transparency," he explains. "Exactly where the money to build the canal will come from is another mystery, as is the role, if any, the Chinese government will play."

A canal across Nicaragua has been a dream since the Spanish looked into it in the 1500s, Mr. Miller recounts. A 1902 canal plan made it to the United States Congress, competing with a plan for Panama. With concerns about Nicaraguan tectonics, "in a narrow vote, the Panama route was approved."

Earthquakes aren't the only environmental risk. In a column for Nature, Axel Meyer, a zoologist and evolutionary biologist at the University of Konstanz in Germany, and Jorge A. Huete-Pérez, a molecular biologist at the Central American University in Nicaragua, called for an independent environmental assessment and wrote: "This canal could create an environmental disaster in Nicaragua and beyond. The excavation

of hundreds of kilometers from coast to coast, traversing Lake Nicaragua, the largest drinking-water reservoir in the region, will destroy around 400,000 hectares of rainforests and wetlands.”

“The accompanying development could imperil surrounding ecosystems,” they write. “Some 240 kilometers north of the most likely route of the canal lies the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve — 2 million hectares of tropical forest that is the last refuge of many disappearing species. Less than 115 kilometers to the south is the Indio Maiz Biological Reserve, with more than 318,000 hectares of tropical dry forest. Worse still, the probable canal route cuts through the northern sector of the Cerro Silva Natural Reserve.”

Also at risk are the livelihoods of indigenous communities, “such as the Rama, Garifuna, Mayangna, Miskitu, and Ulwa,” Mr. Meyer and Mr. Huete-Pérez write. Hundreds of villages will need to be evacuated in order to clear a path for the canal.

“And then there’s Lake Nicaragua,” writes Roff Smith for National Geographic. The planned canal route bisects the 3,100-square-mile lake, the largest in Central America, and “a vital potential reservoir for drinking water.”

Already “as little as 2 percent of the lake’s outflow into the Río San Juan could satisfy the clean-water needs of Nicaragua’s six million people,” Mr. Smith writes. “The canal could jeopardize that freshwater source,” as “links to the ocean could introduce salinity,” and oil spilt from traversing ships would surely contaminate that precious 2 percent potability.

The Nicaraguan government is faced with an age-old conundrum — do the benefits of major public-works projects outweigh their inevitable environmental and social costs? It appears the answer, for now, is a less-than-tentative “yes.”

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