

MEKONG NEWS

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION

Mekong Prime Ministers agreed to prioritise climate change at MRC Summit

Prime Ministers of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam agreed at the first MRC Summit in early April that adjusting to the challenges posed by climate change is a regional priority.

On behalf of the delegates at the Summit, H.E. Abhisit Vejjajiva, Prime Minister of Thailand, summarised nine areas of “priority action,” for Mekong River Commission Member Countries, which included climate change and responding to droughts. He called on the countries present to “avoid the risks of harmful effects that might result from natural occurrences and man-made activities, and to protect the immense value of the Basin’s natural ecosystems.”

“We encourage the MRC to further integrate climate change adaptation in its work,” said Mr. Abhisit, “and to significantly expand cooperation



Highest level delegation from four MRC Member Countries, Dialogue Partners and Development Partners at the First MRC Summit to prioritise water resource issues. Photo: MRC

with Dialogue Partners (China and Myanmar), Development Partners and other stakeholders. In this connection, we welcome and call on upstream Riparian States to join the MRC in the

future,” he added.

The Mekong region is one of the most vulnerable in the world to the long-term impacts of climate change, due to

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MRC Hua Hin Declaration

The following summary of the MRC Hua Hin Declaration was presented at the Summit by H.E Mr. Abhisit Vejjajiva. The full text can be found at <http://www.mrcsummit2010.org/>

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates of Member Countries of the Mekong River Commission, MRC Dialogue Partners and Development Partners, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Prime Ministers of MRC Member Countries, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Viet Nam and Thailand, I am honoured to present a summary of the Declaration of the First Mekong River Commission Summit - to be known as the MRC Hua Hin Declaration.

Recalling the signing of the 1995 Mekong Agreement, we recognise that the sustainable management of water resources in the Mekong River Basin is crucial to the economic and social well-being of people of the Basin and to poverty alleviation efforts. We affirm our strong and continued



H.E. Mr. Abhisit Vejjajiva addressed highest delegation at the Firrst MRC Summit. The Summit declared commitment to promoting regional cooperation in addressing the pressing challenges that are facing the Mekong River Basin. Photo: MRC

commitment to cooperate and promote the sustainable development, utilisation, conservation and management of the Mekong Basin’s water and related resources.

In relation to the significant achievements of

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Mekong Prime Ministers...

a relatively high proportion of people living on low incomes and the limited regional government capacity to deal with the issue.

Besides committing to increasing efforts to adapt to climate change across

the basin, the Mekong governments agreed to intensify efforts to protect people at risk from flooding; encourage river navigation and trade; improve basin water quality; and evaluate the opportunities and challenges of proposed hydropower schemes.

MRC Hua Hin...

the past 15 years, we recognise the increasing level of ownership from Member Countries has strengthened the cooperative governance of the MRC and its effectiveness as an independent knowledge-based River Basin Organisation. We applaud its approach of Integrated Water Resources Management. We appreciate the continued and increasing cooperation with its Dialogue Partners, particularly as seen in this current dry season, and the alliances with international organisations and the strategic support from MRC's Development Partners.

We acknowledge that there are both development opportunities and challenges to be faced over the next decade as our economies continue to grow and populations expand. We commit to cooperate further to tackle these through MRC's Strategic Plan for 2011-2015. We note that significant opportunities exist to intensify existing international and regional partnerships

and we confirm a continued focus on active stakeholder participation.

In terms of priority areas of action, we highlight that further cooperation over the coming years will be required to optimise multiple-use of water resources and mutual benefits for all riparians, to avoid the risks of harmful effects that might result from natural occurrences and man-made activities, and to protect the immense value of the Basin's natural ecosystems. In doing so, we encourage MRC to further integrate climate change adaptation in its work and to expand cooperation with Dialogue Partners, Development Partners and other stakeholders. In this connection, we welcome other Riparian States to join the MRC in the future.

For the way ahead, we reaffirm our solidarity and the highest level of political commitment to the implementation of the Mekong Agreement. Furthermore, we commit to working together for sustainable development, economic growth and improvement of livelihoods. In

The upper basin includes parts of China and Myanmar and both countries have been Dialogue Partners to the Mekong River Commission since 1996. In recent years, China has been increasing technical cooperation and has agreed to further this with basin countries. 

parallel, we recognise that efforts need to be expanded to protect the natural resources of the Mekong Basin for the sustainable management and use of the Basin's resources.

Consistent with the Initiative for ASEAN Integration, we emphasise the need to prioritise resources, funding and capacity building for those Member Countries where poverty is highest and economic need is most urgent. Recognising that economic development is progressing in the Mekong Region, we commit to a vision for the MRC to be financially sustained by Member Countries by 2030.

Furthermore, we decide that an MRC Summit will be convened every four years.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

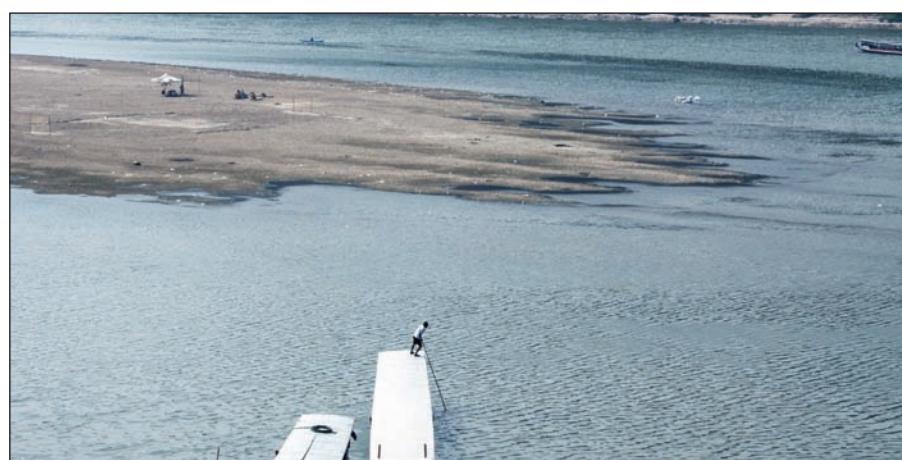
I hereby table the full text of the MRC Hua Hin Declaration for adoption by the Heads of Government of MRC Member Countries. 

China shares data on Mekong water levels

China has shared hydrological data with countries in the lower basin during the 2010 dry season, says the Mekong River Commission (MRC).

Extended cooperation with China to provide the MRC Secretariat with data during this dry season from the hydro-meteorological stations at Jinghong and Man'an, starting in March was very positive news. It demonstrates China's commitment to engage with lower basin countries and cooperate in MRC's independent analysis of the extreme low flow regime experienced this year in the upper part of the Mekong River Basin.

The data sharing builds on cooperation since 2002 with China during the flood seasons which has helped improve the accuracy of flood forecasting in the wet season. Besides informing downstream



Besides informing countries downstream of water flows from upstream, data on water levels in the dry season is available to inform boat operators about navigation conditions. Photo: MRC

states of the water flows coming from upstream, the information on water levels in the dry season is available to

inform boat operators about navigation

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conditions.

The initiative from China is part of a growing cooperation which includes areas of flood management, safety of navigation and environmental assessments of hydropower proposals.

The timing of the announcement before the Summit boded well for the discussions between MRC and

the Chinese delegation and was supplemented by additional information on the inflows and outflows from the dams in Yunnan. Analysis already published by the MRC on its website has shown that the extremely low flows were caused by extremely low rainfall across the upper part of the Basin, rather than any man-made infrastructure on the river (see page 4). Mr. Jeremy Bird,

CEO of the MRC Secretariat, said that China's decision to share more data is a good example of regional cooperation. It helps to clear the ambiguity on this issue and further builds the trust necessary to jointly address issues facing the Basin, such as food security and climate change. 

Hua Hin Conference called on Mekong leaders to balance economic development with protection of water resources

International water experts meeting in Hua Hin in early April called upon the Mekong governments to work together to protect water resources in the region when considering any future development projects.

After two days of discussions, more than 200 international experts, from River Basin Organisations around the world, Government agencies in the fields of hydropower, water resource management and environmental protection and NGOs released a message stressing the urgency of joint action in climate change, improving water quality and protecting the economic and poverty alleviation potential of the Mekong Basin.

Jeremy Bird, CEO of the MRC Secretariat said that the overall message agreed to by participants in the conference is clear: the economic, social and environmental prosperity of Mekong countries depends on how we protect and share the benefits of common water resources through cooperative mechanisms.

The statement, which was presented to Prime Ministers from Mekong



The Summary Session of the International Conference as presented by H.E Suwit Khunkitti, called on Mekong government leaders to cooperate in balancing between water resource development, and social and environmental costs. Photo: MRC

countries, drew attention to the challenge of adapting to the potential impacts of climate change on water resources in the Basin, which are expected to include increased frequency and intensity of floods and droughts, and significant sea level rise. It called on Mekong countries to begin to strengthen disaster risk management and to emphasise water security for the poorest people in the basin, who the international experts at the Conference agreed, are most likely to suffer under the expected impacts of global warming.

The Conference also called for all parties in the basin to be more open with the provision of trans-boundary water related data, claiming in the statement that "transparent access to current and accurate water resources information throughout the basin is essential. Monitoring of rainfall, flows and water quality is a prerequisite for building cooperation. Data needs to be shared for trans-boundary cooperation to develop effectively."

Delegates also called for increasing the involvement of civil society stakeholders in planning activities and decision making processes for river developments.

Messages from the International Conference

- Addressing the challenges of sustainable food and energy production in trans-boundary basins;
- Addressing approaches to adaptation to climate change in international river basins;
- Addressing private sector involvement infrastructure development in shared river basin; and
- Addressing the challenges for trans-boundary river basins organisations in a changing world

The full text can be found at <http://www.mrcsummit2010.org/message-of-the-intl-conference.html> 



The Pre-Summit International Conference was a unique opportunity to bring together worldwide high level experts to enable learning from both international and domestic experiences in addressing future challenges in trans-boundary water resources management. Photo: MRC

Low river levels caused by extreme low rainfall

Much of northern Thailand and Lao PDR, southwest China, and some parts of Viet Nam suffer from one of the worst dry periods in recent history. This is reflected in unusually low river levels throughout the Mekong Basin on the mainstream and its tributaries.

Farmers and fisher folks had difficulties in access to water and are vulnerable to disease from use of polluted sources. Low water levels have also severely disrupted river transport and tourism, further affecting livelihoods of people who depend upon the river.

MRC analysis showed that the low water levels in the Mekong and its tributaries are the result of extreme natural conditions. Very low rainfall this dry season, following a particularly early end to the wet season in 2009, has registered the lowest recorded levels in 50 years.

For example, at Chiang Saen in northern Thailand close to the Chinese border, the 2009 wet season ended about one and a half months early and rainfall in



Low water levels have disrupted river transport and tourism, affecting livelihoods of people who totally depend on the river. Photo: MRC

both September and October 2009 was 30 percent below average. Rainfall in Yunnan province has also been low, with amounts consistently below average since August 2009.

The reduced Mekong levels at the end of the wet season were typically at one-in-ten year lows. With very low rainfall afterwards, water levels at most mainstream measuring stations in Lao PDR and Thailand dropped below those for the 1992-1993 season, then the most extreme dry period on record.

The conditions became more severe moving downstream from Chiang Saen to Vientiane.

Flow in tributaries in northern Lao PDR such as the Nam Ou, north of Luang Prabang, which feeds into the flow in the mainstream, are the lowest since our record keeping began 50 years ago. For more information, see the report on low water level conditions in the Mekong mainstream at http://www.mrcmekong.org/download/REVISED_Report-on-low-Mekong-Flows-5mar10.pdf.

Cambodia and Viet Nam formally open up cross-border trade on the Mekong River

Cambodia and Viet Nam signed a treaty that allows freedom of navigation on Mekong waterways between the two countries and increases access to the river system for foreign vessels.

The Treaty on Waterway Transportation, signed by both countries in Phnom Penh in December 2009, provides the legal framework for Cambodia and Viet Nam to reduce official restrictions that existed for cross-border navigation. The move free-ups regional and international trade, helps avoid delays and makes river-based customs and immigration procedures more efficient and straight-forward. The agreement also introduced a range of other measures that should improve efficiency and safety for vessels using the more than 65 Cambodian and Vietnamese registered internal ports.

The Mekong and other tributaries between Cambodia and Viet Nam are now officially open. This will not only improve the quality and efficiency of waterborne transport in the Mekong



The Agreement allows free cross-border transport of cargo and passengers in the Mekong Delta, Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and many more sites. Photo: MRC

Region, but in the long-term, will increase export potential and help both Cambodia and Viet Nam achieve their poverty alleviation goals.

The agreement and the recent development of Cai Mep Port in Viet Nam provide greater opportunities for economic growth in the two countries, which can now realise the full potential of the Mekong River by transporting goods directly to the United States, Europe and Australia through Cai Mep Port.

The MRC facilitated the cross-border agreement by assisting a legal task

force in both countries, with funding provided by the Governments of Belgium and Australia.

The new treaty opens up Mekong waterways to new possibilities for generating trade revenue, allowing all waterway users to freely cross borders for the transport of cargo and passengers. This helps all vessels, including river cruise ships by allowing better access to ports in the Mekong Delta, Ho Chi Minh City, Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and many more sites. The full text of the treaty can be seen at <http://www.mrcmekong.org>

Gender responsiveness and climate change



Climate change exposes women and men to different risks and opportunities. Photo: MRC

Men and women may be affected differently by climate change. There are different gender-based social expectations, economic and power dynamics between men and women in many parts of the Mekong Basin, which may impact on how both genders are individually affected.

- Because of gender-based division of labour, women and men often perform different tasks in communities. Climate change exposes women and men to different risks and opportunities. For example, in a climate change affected community, men may respond by migrating to cities in search of work, while women may be forced to spend more time collecting wood and water. Therefore, as climate change could exacerbate the existing lack of water resources and fuel wood, the additional time taken to fetch water or wood may increase women's workloads, thus limiting their opportunities to be involved in other activities.
- Women and men may have different access to resources, including physical resources such as land; social resource networks; and financial/ income-generation resources. In times of change, women and men will have different options and safety nets for coping.
- Women often have less access to decision-making and political power than men, and this can affect their participation and their representation in decision-making on climate change.

Experience from other developing countries shows that interventions to strengthen livelihoods and food security

from external shocks are more efficient and effective when gender differences are properly understood and addressed.

Equal involvement of women and men in adaptation planning ensures that the activities and measures developed are beneficial for all; and that all relevant knowledge from all sectors of society is integrated into policy and programmes.

Women are not only vulnerable to climate change but they are also effective and active agents for mitigation and adaptation. Women often have a strong body of knowledge of their local environment that can be utilised in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation strategies.

The MRC Climate Change and Adaptation Initiative (CCAI), a joint regional effort of Member Countries, is involving women in climate change decision-making processes, so that their thoughts and ideas influence climate change policy and programme design.

The MRC, with gender specialist support, uses a participatory approach to mainstreaming gender aspects in vulnerability assessments, adaptation activities as well as in planning and implementation, drawing on local knowledge and experiences of both women and men. The CCAI is piloting demonstration sites for adaptation activities in communities in Lao PDR that are vulnerable to drought and floods by working with farmers to assess the effects of projected changes in climate and to work out measures to adapt to the changes (see p 6). The lessons learned from the demonstration sites will be useful for up-scaling and replicating climate change adaptation activities in the other Member Countries.

Gender mainstreaming is the concept of assessing the different implications for women and men of any planned policy or action so that both genders can benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. Mainstreaming infuses consideration of gender related issues into all policy development, research, advocacy, legislation, resource allocation, planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes and projects.

Gender responsiveness at the MRC

There are some factors that still impede women's full access to benefits from natural resources and prevent them from playing a full role in developing and strengthening management institutions.

Gender is a priority issue and is taken into account in all aspects of MRC's development programming.

Some of the MRC's actions in this area include:

- Ensuring equal opportunities among female and male staff members in the areas of recruitment, promotion, privileges, training and working conditions.
- Implementing a policy of disaggregating data by sex for needs assessment and programme planning and to include gender analysis into programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- Increasing awareness and skills of staff and line agency officials in considering the social differences between men and women when designing, implementing and evaluating programmes.
- Conducting a systematic review of, and putting into place, institutional procedures which ensure that the needs of men and women, are all met equitably in planning MRC development activities.

The MRC is working to address women's practical and strategic concerns and priorities through its support to the regional Network for Promotion of Gender in Fisheries and its national chapters. 

Basin Development Plan Sub-Area meeting in Upper Sekong

The Basin Development Plan (BDP) 7L Sub-Area Meeting of the Upper Sekong Basin was held in Sekong Province in late February and attended by around 100 participants from a wide range of local, provincial, Upper Sekong tributary, non-governmental organisations and national agency stakeholders.

The meeting's aims were to introduce planned activities of the Basin Development Plan Programme Phase 2 to stakeholders in the Sekong Basin; to collect feedback; and to encourage stakeholder participation in river basin planning in the Lower Mekong Basin. It also aimed at identifying the current situation, issues and opportunities for strengthening management and development with the goal of sustainable use of resources and poverty reduction in the 7L - Sekong Basin Sub-Area.



The meeting is one way for encouraging stakeholder participation to identify issues and opportunities for water resource management and development, which is central to the MRC's Basin Development Planning processes. Photo: MRC

The meeting is one of the most prominent ways to promote stakeholder participation and decentralised basin planning processes. Sub-area activities includes development of tributary profiles, participatory assessment of

significant projects, transboundary and sub-area meetings which are conducted, led and jointly operated by the MRC and stakeholders in the Lower Mekong Basin. 

MRC established climate change adaptation site in Lao PDR's Savannakhet

The Mekong River Commission (MRC) and Government of Lao PDR agreed to establish a site for demonstrating best practice in dealing with the potential impacts of climate change on Lao agriculture and rural life.

A site has been chosen in Savannakhet, where the MRC's Climate Change and Adaptation Initiative (CCAI) is working with local farmers to assess how they may be affected by projected changes to the climate in coming years and test out measures to adapt to these changes, particularly in relation to awareness raising and training for villagers and improving water supply.

The Mekong region is one of the most vulnerable in the world to the long-term impacts of climate change, due to a relatively high proportion of people living on low incomes and the lack of regional government capacity to deal with the issue.

The demonstration site activities in the four Lower Mekong Basin countries will benefit the communities directly and



At the demonstration site, CCAI team work with local farmers to assess how they can be affected by changing climate and work out measures to adapt to the changes. Photo: MRC

provide 'lessons learned' for up-scaling or replicating in similar sites in Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam.

According to global climate change modelling that has been downscaled to basin level, some changes are likely in the next decades, including a change in rainfall patterns, which could increase the risk of floods and droughts; an increased risk of extremes of hot and cold temperature in different parts of

the basin; and changes in the flow of the river and tributaries, which could influence fish migration. It is also possible that change in run-off could have serious consequences for farmers while in the south of the basin, sea level rise of up to one metre are predicted, making the Mekong Delta one of the five most vulnerable deltas in the world. 

Regional consultation on the formulation of the MRC Strategic Plan 2011-2015

The first Regional Meeting on formulating the MRC Strategic Plan 2011-2015 was held in mid-March. Delegates from National Mekong Committee Secretariats and Line Agencies openly shared their views and made valuable suggestions and constructive comments to the formulation of the MRC Strategic Plan for 2011-2015.

The two day meeting witnessed detailed discussions over key strategic questions for the MRC such as its role in pro-poor development and definition of MRC's core functions as well as exchanges of important national perspectives and views. This served to form the basis for the Strategic Plan for the next five years.

The meeting debated the proposed goals for the new Strategic Plan 2011-2015 in order to refine them and make them more measurable as well as be responsive to the needs and welfare of



A regional perspective is central to the MRC basin-wide strategic document that adopts the principles of Integrated Water Resources Management. Photo: MRC

the Mekong countries and their people within the next five year period. They were also evaluated against the goals, objectives and gaps of the current Strategic Plan 2006-2010. Delegates discussed the roles and responsibilities that the MRC Secretariat, National Mekong Committees, National Mekong Committee Secretariats and

Line Agencies can play to achieve the desired outcomes over the next strategic plan period. The second regional consultation is planned in June, and the Strategic Plan 2011-2015 is to be submitted to MRC Council for approval at its Seventeenth Meeting in November 2010. 

Environmental assessment of proposed hydropower on the mainstream Mekong

The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of proposed hydropower schemes on the mainstream, which aims to identify the potential opportunities and associated risks as well as the contribution of hydropower to regional development, held a regional multi-stakeholder workshop in Phnom Penh in late January to consider baseline data.

About 70 participants from MRC Member Countries, Development Partners, NGOs, CSOs, international institutions and project investors gathered to provide inputs and discuss next steps in the SEA, especially the assessment of risks and opportunities. The meeting presented the SEA findings so far which, among others, looked at past trends in the key themes and their main drivers, the current situation and government plans and targets as well as the outlook for the Mekong in the absence of mainstream hydropower development over the next few decades.

The MRC directed by the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) governments,



SEA meetings allow Mekong Governments and their stakeholders to look at past trends, discuss key issues and prepare outlook for the Mekong River Basin. Photo: MRC

is conducting the SEA of eleven hydropower schemes proposed on the mainstream Mekong. These proposed projects have a combined installed capacity of 14,000 megawatts and represent some of the most important development decisions facing the LMB region. The SEA has completed its initial scoping stage and baseline assessment stage to be followed by an impact assessment stage which will

be reported in May. The completed process includes national meetings and involvement of community representatives and non-governmental organisations in the four Member Countries. Reports and presentations from the SEA, which are updated regularly, are available at <http://www.mrcmekong.org/ish/SEA.htm>. 

UPCOMING EVENTS

- Stakeholder Regional Workshop on Avoidance, Enhancement and Mitigation Assessment, 28-29 June 2010**

The Workshop will discuss measures and suggestions from the SEA Study on avoidance and mitigation of risks and enhancement of benefits identified in the impact assessment of the Basin Development Plan 20 year scenario 'Lower Mekong Basin with mainstream hydropower development.' Next steps in the SEA of proposed hydropower dams on the mainstream Mekong will also be discussed.

- 3rd Regional Stakeholder Forum on Mekong Basin Development**

Plan, 29-30 July 2010, Vientiane, Lao PDR

The Forum seeks views and inputs from stakeholders to the results of the MRC Basin Development Scenarios, the formulation of the Basin Development Strategy for the Lower Mekong Basin, and to the functioning of the MRC as a river basin organisation.

• 32nd MRC Joint Committee and 15th Dialogue Meetings, 24-27 August 2010, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

The Meetings will cover approval of MRC IWRM-based Basin Development

Strategy; consideration on new phases of Programmes including Basin Development, Environment, Flood Management and Mitigation, Information Knowledge Management Programmes; increased cooperation with Dialogue Partners; as well as progress on the current formulation process of the MRC Strategic Plan 2011-2015.

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Phone: (856-21) 263 263 ext. 4702 Fax: (856-21) 263 264

Email: mrcs@mrcmekong.org

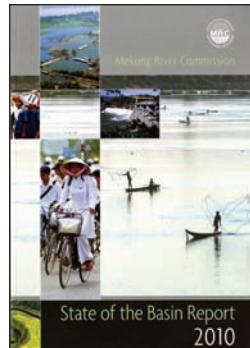
IN BRIEF

State of the Basin Report 2010

Lunched at the First MRC Summit, the report paints a picture of how fisheries, forestry, agriculture, hydropower, water quality, wetlands, navigation and trade, climate change and flood management interact together, influence, and are influenced by poverty and social development in the Mekong River Basin. The report reveals

that water quality of almost all the mainstream monitoring stations is rated as 'excellent' for the protection of aquatic life and that there are no direct water quality threats to the river's aquatic biodiversity. However, the report also warns that the water quality and ecosystem of the river may be under threat due to accelerating economic development,

population growth and changed consumption patterns of the basin's population. These pressures are placing the health of wetland ecosystems and their ability to sustain the livelihoods of a growing population at risk. The full report is available for download at: www.mrcmekong.org/free_download/report.htm



15 Year Anniversary of Cooperation for Sustainable Development 1995-2010

The anniversary booklet entitled '15 Years of Cooperation for Sustainable Development 1995-2010'

briefly outlines the areas of Mekong cooperation achieved by the Mekong River Commission since the

signing of the 1995 Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin.

Co-hosted location of the MRC Secretariat

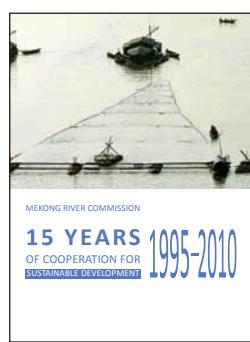
The Sixteenth Meeting of the MRC Council in Hua Hin, Thailand on 26 November 2009 decided that the MRC Secretariat would be co-hosted in two locations, the Office of the Secretariat in

Vientiane (OSV) at its current location and the Office of the Secretariat in Phnom Penh (OSP). The OSP will be located at the Regional Flood Management and Mitigation Centre (RFMMC) P.O. Box

623, 576 National Road # 2, Sangkat Chak Angre Krom, Khan Menachey, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Tel. (855-23) 425 353

Fax. (855-23) 425 363



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