Beijing Admits to ‘Urgent’ Problems with Three Gorges Dam

In a rare admission of problems associated with one of its signature infrastructure projects, China’s government warned Thursday that all is not well with the Three Gorges Dam.

China’s cabinet, the State Council, said in a statement released on its website that the $23 billion dam had provided “huge comprehensive benefits” but that a number of problems remained and were “urgently in need of resolution.”

Among the concerns listed in the statement (in Chinese): ecological deterioration, potential for geological disasters and the status of the more than a million people relocated to make way for the dam.

Dreamed of both by China’s modern founding father Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong, the Three Gorges Dam was meant to tame the floods of the Yangtze River and generate climate-friendly electricity. Construction of the 600-foot-tall dam, the world’s largest, began in 1994 after years of delays and debate over the merits of undertaking such a large and potentially disruptive project.

The dam has largely delivered on its promise to deliver low-carbon electricity, producing roughly 84 billion kilowatt hours in 2010, according to China Daily. But torrential rains
last summer cast doubt on its capacity to control floods, and the project has been beset by issues ranging from pollution-fed algae blooms to mountainous islands of floating trash to worrying cracks in the earth in nearby fields.

Thursday’s statement, produced in a meeting presided over by premier Wen Jiabao, said some of problems had been foreseen in the design process but couldn’t be addressed until after the dam was operational.

Other problems, the statement said, “were discovered in construction but were difficult to solve because of conditions at the time, and others arose because of new demands posed by economic and social development.”

Addressing arguably the most politically sensitive consequence of the project, the statement said the government aims to ensure that all migrants displaced by the dam are provided with a social safety net and enjoy the same quality of life equivalent as others in nearby regions by the year 2020.

Without going into specifics, the State Council also said it planned to improve efforts to control water pollution and address the danger from geological disasters.

Thursday’s statement wasn’t the first time Beijing has openly sounded alarms on the Three Gorges Dam. In comments reported by the state-run Xinhua news agency in the fall of 2007, experts warned of “hidden problems”—including landslides, erosion and pollution—which, if left unresolved, “could lead to catastrophe.”

Then, too, the warnings were followed by promises address the concerns surrounding the project. While critics of the project may take heart from the fact that Mr. Wen was personally involved in the government’s latest Three Gorges mea culpa, one of China’s most respected environmental activists remains unconvinced.

Responding to the State Council’s statement, Dai Qing, a veteran environmentalist who has long opposed the dam, argued in an interview with Reuters that much of damage caused by the Three Gorges project was irreversible.

“The most serious threat is that of geological disasters,” she told Reuters. “Now that the dam is in place, no amount of money can fix the problem. It fundamentally cannot be resolved.”

Ms. Dai called the statement an attempt by China’s leaders to “shirk responsibility” for the dam’s problems.

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