OCTOPUS pipeline project threatens top Chilean wetland for migratory and resident birds

Title

The Rocuant-Andalién wetland located between the cities of Talcahuano, Penco and Concepción, Chile is under threat from the proposed construction of a liquid gas pipeline connecting a new maritime terminal called "OCTOPUS Maritime Terminal, Concepción Bay, VIII region of Bio-bio" with two new thermo-electric plants to be built inland. This huge project, which is likely to affect the hydrological and ecological integrity of this and other coastal and riverine wetlands, is backed by a group of investors from the United States, Germany and Chile to the tune of US$150 million. CODEFF (BirdLife in Chile), the Local Conservation Group of the wetland and the BirdLife Americas Secretariat immediately registered their objection to this project and sent a long list of detailed comments and observations to the Environmental Evaluation Service of Bio-bio regarding the Environmental Impact Assessment for the first phase of the project, which is currently being considered by the relevant authorities.

Rocuant-Andalien wetland is recognized as an Important Bird Area (IBA) for its high concentrations of the globally Near Threatened Elegant Tern *Thalasseus elegans* and Peruvian Pelican *Pelecanus thagus*, as well as for migratory birds such as Franklin´s Gull *Larus pipixcan*, Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*, Black Skimmer *Rhynchops niger* and Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*. Due to its importance for migratory waterbirds from the Northern Hemisphere and particularly for the presence of Franklin´s Gull, the site was selected to form part of the "Linking Sites, Linking People" project funded for years by US Fish and Wildlife Service NMBCA and Rio Tinto. The project, due to finish later this year, has made enormous advances in raising awareness of this wetland's importance for birds and people and towards securing its legal declaration as a Nature Sanctuary under Chilean law.

On the 31st of July, the mayors of the communities of Talcahuano, Penco and Tomé met and declared their complete rejection of the OCTOPUS project. Patricio Ortiz, the coordinator of the NMBCA-Rio Tinto project from CODEFF says: "this is a very important declaration of support for the conservation of this wetland by the Municipalities concerned. However, the battle is not won yet as the project has the blessing of the government of Chile and rejecting or changing it will be a long process".

The Environmental Evaluation Service of Chile has officially acknowledged the receipt of the objections lodged by CODEFF and the wider BirdLife Partnership, but they still have to respond to the comments presented to them. In the meantime, on 14th of August various civil-society groups, including CODEFF, met to request that the Ministry of Environment declare Rocuant-Andalien as a Nature Sanctuary. As Patricio Ortiz explains: "the rapid declaration of this wetland would provide a key argument for blocking the construction of the gas pipeline through it, and other projects that could harm the site´s ecological and environmental integrity. The wetland has suffered in the past from industrial, port, housing and road projects but despite these it remains ecological intact and rich wildlife – now it is time to leave it alone and protect it legally".