

## VENICE: MIXED REACTIONS TO BARRIER'S APPROVAL BY COURT BY Dominic Standish

(ANSA) - Venice, May 24 - A Veneto court's decision to reject appeals against Venice's flood barrier plan was hailed by some, but environmentalists experienced that sinking feeling.

The Veneto regional court (TAR) on Saturday rejected appeals by environmentalists to block the building of mobile barriers at the three entrances to the Venetian lagoon.

The 79 barriers have been designed to rise from the seabed to block the lagoon from the Adriatic Sea when high tides are predicted. Preparatory construction work has already begun on the scheme to reduce flooding and Venice's sinking problems.

But environmental organisations - including conservationists Italia Nostra, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the green environment and society association (VAS) - launched appeals to stop the work. They believe the barrier project will damage the lagoon and would be unable to cope with high sea level rises due to global warming.

Venice's city and provincial councils had also asked the TAR court to investigate whether the technical and procedural aspects of the barrier project had been correctly followed.

Supporters of the project focused on the technical endorsement given by TAR's ruling.

Giancarlo Galan, President of the Veneto region noted that TAR's ruling confirmed that "correct insights, controls and investigations were not lacking."

The Venice Water Authority welcomed the decision as approval of its work on the barrier project. "The ruling confirms that the administration had followed the proper technical procedure," said Maria Giovanna Piva, the Authority's President.

Paolo Perlasca of WWF and Alvisè Benedetti of Italia Nostra said they were perplexed by the TAR ruling. VAS's national President, Senator Guido Pollice, similarly expressed "great regret."

"For our association this phase represents one of the saddest moments in efforts to save Venice," complained Orazio Alberti, a VAS Venice representative.

But opposing views were expressed within local government. Paolo Costa, the centre-left Mayor of Venice, and Gianfranco Bettin, the deputy-Mayor of Mestre - Venice's neighbouring city - reacted very differently.

"Personally I am very happy that the validity of the special environmental impact evaluation procedure was acknowledged," said Costa.

But Bettin, a Green Party member, expressed sympathy for the environmentalists. "The arguments raised by

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environmentalists seemed to make sense," commented Bettin.

Costa indicated that he aims to pursue eleven points for environmental improvements with the barrier project, which should help ease the reservations of Green Party members within his council administration.

Bettin revealed his determination to muster a referendum on the barrier project before the end of the year. In addition, further appeals have been sent to the European Commission.