

## OPPOSITION RISES AGAINST VENICE DAM PROJECT

by Dominic Standish

(ANSA) - Venice, 13 February - The 'mother of all battles' has been launched against 'Moses'. This is not a new religious conflict, but how Michele Vianello, a Democratic Left MP, described the rejuvenated campaign against the mobile barrier project in Venice.

'Moses', or Mosè in Italian, is the biblical name widely used for the mobile barriers project to part the seas in Venice. 'MOSE' is an acronym for Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico (experimental electromechanic module), a prototype of the 79 mobile barriers designed to reduce flooding in Venice.

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi inaugurated Project MOSE in May 2003. Since then preparatory work has begun at the entrances to the Venetian lagoon where the barriers will rise to block high tides.

The regional Commission to Safeguard Venice voted in favour of the final executive phase of MOSE on 20 January 2004. Then the Venice Water Authority gave its approval on 30 January with work expected to start on this phase in two months.

Members of the Green Party and the Democratic Left - the biggest opposition party - have responded by joining forces to stop Project MOSE. In addition, environmental groups such as Italia Nostra and the Italian World Wildlife Fund are mobilising against it.

They have several strategies. This week legal representatives from Italia Nostra and WWF asked the Veneto Regional Administrative Tribunal (TAR) to suspend the preparatory work on Project MOSE.

"It is not possible that one of the most important constructions in the world has not been subject to an environmental impact evaluation," remarked WWF secretary Gaetano Benedetto. A decision is expected on May 6.

On 26 January, members of the Green Party and Communist Refoundation made a formal request for a local referendum on MOSE.

The third strategy against the mobile barriers is an appeal to the European Union. More than 140 MPs in opposition to the Italian government signed a letter asking the EU to investigate Project MOSE.

The letter - presented on February 4 - states that the funding, modifications and approval of Project MOSE have not followed the correct procedures.

In addition, the letter notes that "in 1997 a negative judgement was passed on MOSE by the VIA Commission, a negative judgement confirmed in a 1998 decree by the Environment Minister."

The Environmental Impact Assessments Commission examined the 1997 Environmental Impact Study (VIA) for the Environment Ministry. The Ministry was then run by leading Green, Edo Ronchi, who issued the 1998 decree that stalled MOSE.

This decree was annulled by the TAR court in 2000. The VIA had concluded that the MOSE system would efficiently protect Venice from high tides and have a low environmental impact.

The VIA was endorsed by a College of International Experts in a 1998 report and by another team of experts led by Rafael Bras of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Last September, both critics and supporters of the MOSE project debated Venice's floods at an international

conference in Cambridge (UK).

"The position on the necessity of completing the mobile barriers for Venice was almost unanimous," reported Paolo Cescon, the Director of the Institute for the Dynamics of Environmental Processes at the Italian National Research Council.

So it seems that the campaigners against Project MOSE could also face some opposition. Indeed, 300 Italian MPs, mainly from the governing coalition, signed another letter to the EU supporting MOSE on 12 February. The mother of all battles is hotting up.

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