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OROVERDE  
Stiftung zur Rettung  
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### FACTSHEET

## The Great Rhine-Rhône Canal

In 1958, plans were launched to connect the Rhine and the Rhône rivers by a canal. The project was cancelled in 1997. It took almost 30 years to reach this decision, following numerous expert reports, legal proceedings and street demonstrations.

### What happened ?

In the late 1950's, post-World War II reconstruction efforts had caused an industrial boom in France. The French heavy industry required increased transportation means. Inland waterways were favoured and the Mosel and the Rhône rivers were channellised. A connection between the Rhine, the prime European waterway from Rotterdam to Basel, with the Rhône with its Mediterranean outlet at Marseilles, came high on national priorities. It was seen as the French economic axis of the future.

Engineers soon started developing plans for this ambitious project. The trajectory would follow the Napoleon canal built in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and two existing rivers; the Doubs and the Saône. The Rhine-Rhône canal would run over 244 km and allow boats of 4,400 tons (in comparison with 350 tons on the Napoleon canal). 23 locks needed to be built in order to solve the problem of a 336 meter difference in elevation between the two catchments. The highest lock was planned as a gigantic boat elevator, hoisting boats over 22 meters. The canal would be 150 meters wide – instead of the 12 meters on the Napoleon canal – to allow for proper navigation.

The natural environment was not a consideration at that time. Adapting rivers for navigation purposes was only a technical and subsequently, financial challenge.

High cost projections forced the French Government to delay construction of the project until 1962, with completion to be achieved 10 years later.

Yet, in 1961 the project became controversial, as high level French civil servants announced that the European economy was about to change, with oil replacing coal as the main energy source. They viewed the canal as too slow, too expensive and geographically badly situated, given the rising economies of the Arab countries in the Mediterranean region. Nevertheless, the French government gave the go-ahead to the project in 1962. Nothing happened until the German Government announced construction of the Danube-Main-Rhine waterway ten years later. In 1975, the first public inquiries were initiated, in preparation of land expropriations. Public opposition started immediately in the affected region, known for its self-management principles and social friction. Conservationists, academics, anglers and other social movements/stakeholders organised a public debate on the project, which had been low profile, up until that point.

Promoters continued to support the project and in 1978 it was approved by the French Prime Minister. However, no state budget was allocated for the construction. In fact, French Government agencies produced a series of economic reports concluding that the project had no economic interest, could not compete with road transport and would be a threat to rail transport. A 1986 parliamentary report raised environmental concerns, including weak water provision for the locks, lack of understanding of the



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floods, and potential water contamination. Nine reports were produced between 1986 and 1996, all highlighting the weaknesses and uncertainties of the project; loss of natural habitats, low job creation, optimistic and uncertain expectations, about 100 millions FF/year running costs deficit, etc. A Finance Ministry report concluded that costs would be three times higher than expected (49,4 billion FF instead of the planned 17,3).

The project continued to garner political support and immediately before the 1988 presidential elections, a decision was made to build a first section on the Saône river. Opponents immediately lobbied against this decision and demanded a debate on alternatives to the project that would be less expensive, less damaging for the environment, and more economically effective. 230 organisations joined an increasingly popular coalition in 1986, modelled on the Loire Vivante organisation. In both cases, the opposition won, due to their better technical and scientific data, and most importantly, their superior communications abilities.

The heart of the campaign centred around the pros and cons of river navigation. The suggested ecological merits of river navigation were easily refuted by the fact that the canal would have destroyed two natural rivers and hundreds of hectares of valuable biotopes. The claim that the canal would alleviate road traffic was weakened when it was shown that the reduction would be limited to 2%. Rail traffic was also not as heavy as was previously claimed. The campaigners proposed a solution that combined existing means of transportation in a more favourable way, yet promoters maintained that a canal through the Rhine valley would be the only way to anchor the Eastern region of France within the European dynamic between London and Milan.

With the inauguration of the Mittel-Europa Kanal (Danube-Main-Rhine waterway) in 1992, plans for the Rhine-Rhône canal resurfaced and promoters pointed to the “beautiful” German realisation with its landscape vistas and river tourism. However, the freight estimates to be carried by the canal remained at 4 to 5 millions tons, which in France could easily be transported by rail. In addition, one of the main German transport companies decided to transfer its freight from the Danube to the Rhine from river to rail transport to be faster.

The German example encouraged the French canal promoters to push hard and in 1995, the Parliament passed a law obliging the state electricity company to pay for the construction expenses in exchange for part of the Rhône’s hydropower.

Public opinion forced the Government to organise a public hearing on the project’s technical merits. 85% of the technical experts involved expressed their opposition. The French media closely followed the debate, provided details on the project and gave a voice to the opposition, which increased the pressure on local politicians.

It was now a political issue. During the election run-up, the left-wing and green parties made an agreement against the canal. Many local politicians were put under pressure by their citizens. The right-wing parties were not able to promote it any further, since their 1997 electoral defeat.

When the socialist party came to power, one of the campaign leaders was appointed Minister for Environment and Spatial Development. An agreement was soon reached to cancel the project.

Dominique Voynet, the Green Environment Minister, has since launched an initiative for the sustainable development of the Rhine-Rhône territory by combining the conservation of freshwater resources and natural habitats with restoring the old canal for tourism and modernising the rail network.