

Brazil Celebrates 504th River Anniversary with Stamp

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To commemorate the discovery of the São Francisco River 504 years ago, the Brazilian Post Office (Empresa Brasileira de Correios e Telégrafos) (ECT) and the regional development company (Companhia de Desenvolvimento dos Vales do São Francisco e do Parnaíba) (Codevasf) are launching a stamp today.

The mighty São Francisco River flows for 2,700 kilometers north out of the state of Minas Gerais and through four other states. But it is precisely the course of the river that has always been its biggest problem. It moves through a sparsely-populated, drought-prone region that is among the country's poorest and most backward.

The commemorative stamp shows a map of the river basin, the Paulo Afonso power plant (the original hydroelectric power plant was built in 1913), and scenes from riverside life.

One of the major steps planned by the Brazilian government for 2005/2006 still exists only on paper. But, if it gets through all the stages the law requires, it promises to be one of the largest infrastructure projects executed during President Lula's term of office. The numbers are impressive, as well as the possible benefits to be derived from the integration of the São Francisco River Valley with six other river basins in Northeast Brazil.

President Lula declared that delivering water to the Northeast "represents the pledge, not of a President, but of a Northeastern migrant" who was forced to leave the region in 1952, for want of opportunity. To fulfill this "pledge," the federal government has already set aside US\$ 394 million (1.07 billion reais) in the 2005 budget for the river basin integration project.

In the Administration's view, if the integration project receives the approval of the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama), as well as Congressional budget backing, work can get underway soon.

The construction of the two canals, which, all told, will cover a distance of 720 kilometers, together with the pumping stations and the mini-hydroelectric stations along the way, will cost around US\$ 1.6 billion (4.5 billion reais).

According to calculations made by the Ministry of National Integration, around 15 million people should be benefited by the project. The water obtained from the São Francisco will be routed through concrete channels running in northerly and easterly directions and will be intended, first of all, for human consumption.

Once this demand is met, the system's administrators should evaluate the possibility of making water available to farmers and industrialists.

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