

Climate change is already here, Islands may be model for energy conservation: EPA official

Saipan Tribune

Wed, 24 Jun 2009

Tiny island nations in the Pacific are now feeling the impact of rising sea levels linked to climate change—from disappearing coastal villages to washed-out shores, flooded streets and taro patches, landslides and contamination of drinking water—even as the rest of the world are still thinking that climate change is far off into the future. “It’s happening. Climate change is no longer a future thing. It’s already here, it’s already on our shores,” said Joe Konno of the Federated States of Micronesia’s (FSM) National Office of Environment and Emergency Management during yesterday’s opening of the 26th Pacific Islands Environment Conference at the Saipan World Resort. Mr Konno showed conference participants pictures of disappearing coastlines and a washed out graveyard on one of the atolls in the FSM to dramatize his point. “There seems to be reluctance to accepting climate change. I believe it’s about time not to wait. We have to start. We need political will,” he said. Dr. Cheryl Anderson of the University of Hawaii’s Social Science Research Institute and Mr Konno also said that climate change data are outdated, given the time that had elapsed between peer review and publication. They stressed that more needs to be done to help tiny island communities adapt to rising sea level. Dr Anderson cited some of the people and livelihood impacts from climate change, including diminished water supply, lack of food security, increase in waterborne diseases; increased hardships to people, and erosion of cultural and sacred lands. Emission cuts FSM’s Konno said the Association of Small Island States is pushing for a 45-percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2020, which is much higher than the 20 percent many other countries are advocating in international forums. In his presentation, Konno said the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change in Rio has “no teeth,” and the targets set by the Kyoto Protocol are “too low.”

“The 45 percent [reduction] is what we’re fighting for,” said Mr Konno. Model communities U.S. EPA Region 9 acting administrator Laura Yoshii, the highest federal official at the conference, said island communities can be a model for energy conservation. “Island people, with some education and outreach, can understand the finite resources,” she said in an interview during a break at the conference. Ms Yoshii said island communities can also take the lead in energy independence. “Instead of paying so much for imported oil—the prices are not going to be stable, or increasing—think of ways to conserve energy and use renewable energy,” she said.

Experts at the conference have said that the Pacific areas can easily tap into renewable energy sources such as wind and sun. Behavioral change during an open discussion on the climate change panel, a member of the audience voiced out concern that environmental conferences almost always forget behavioral change to help alter the course of climate change. Another member of the audience, a resident of American Samoa, called for a “back to basics” approach in dealing with climate change like doing

away with vehicles. But Mr Konno said while this is a good suggestion, curtailing the use of vehicles, especially F150 trucks in island communities, will not make an impact because greenhouse gas emissions from these areas, excluding the CNMI and Guam, is less than 1 percent of the world rate. Instead, he recommends going after the big emitters such as the United States.

A future without oil Gil Masters, author and emeritus professor of environmental engineering and science at Stanford University and keynote speaker at the conference, focused on “planning for a future without oil.” “How do we plan the future without much cheap oil? Yes, there are lots of oil out there but can the rate by which we exploit these resources keep up with the demand?” asked Mr Masters.

In presenting his calculation, Mr Masters said if crude oil reaches US\$200 a barrel, then one can expect to pay US\$7 a gallon for diesel or 40 cents per kilowatt hours of energy. Mr Masters said the first step in planning for the future without much cheap oil is setting a goal. “Minimum dependence on imported fuel in the CNMI and other Pacific island nations by 2030 based on efficient use of energy and renewable energy systems, and create some sort of a plan with a short-term, medium-term and long-term implication,” he said. He also recommended a focus on demand for fuel rather than the supply of fuel. “Another key thing is to shift our attention from a supply-side solution to a demand-side solution,” he said. To further illustrate his point of energy sufficiency, Masters used as an example the Saipan World Resort where the conference is being held. He said the hotel has the wrong orientation for energy efficiency but has the right orientation for tourism because the windows face the ocean. Almost all CNMI hotels windows face the oceans which is one of the islands' tourism resources. CNMI, Ms Yoshii said the CNMI has come a long way in improving access to drinking water and wastewater infrastructure since the last time she visited the islands 12 years ago, although there are still a lot to be done to have a 24-hour drinking water. She also pointed out the presence of environmental professionals. “They now have a whole Division of Environmental Quality when before, it was just a handful of people. Now they really have people with expertise to deal with some of those [environmental] issues,” she said. Guam Governor Felix P. Camacho, in a separate interview, said Guam has been cited by the EPA for over 23 years for its solid waste problems but under his administration, the island closed the Ordot Dump and secured funding to build a new landfill. “We've been successful in that endeavor, and we have had to borrow up to \$202 million combined for this endeavor. It's very costly. Because it was never addressed in years past, the cost, of course, has risen over time,” he said.

The Guam governor also takes pride in the marine preserves that have led to increased fish stock in the island's reefs. “It's helping to improve our reef and ecosystem, but the work is never ending. It must continue for generations. If we can preserve what we still have and hopefully restore what's been lost,” he added. Pay attention Lt. Gov. Eloy Inos said it is encouraging to see that climate change is being addressed at local, regional and international levels. “The long term effects of global climate change can directly affect us in the future. We can be adversely affected by rising water levels. Our coastal areas, including this hotel, could become flooded or submerged years later. We must pay

attention,” Mr Inos said. The conference, which has the theme “Climate of Change: Energizing a Sustainable Future for Pacific Islands,” is co-hosted by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the governments of the CNMI, Guam and American Samoa.