

West Hawaii Today

Energy forum decries dependence on oil

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HILO -- "Wake up! The crisis is upon us!"

Maurice Kaya, a strategic energy and management consultant, used these words during a Friday forum to raise awareness of Hawaii Island's energy crisis, which will worsen without effective government intervention.

More than 100 state and local officials and mostly business people gathered for the forum held at the Hilo Hawaiian Hotel to learn about the island's energy course and measures some say need to be immediately implemented.

Gail Tverberg, fellow of the Casualty Actuarial Society, displayed a chart that depicted the growing gap between oil demand and supply.

At the current rate, demand is growing by about 2 percent annually -- and will continue to do so unless wholesale changes are made -- while the supply will continue to dwindle at nearly the same rate, she said.

The Big Island, however, "has probably more resources and it has more possibilities than the mainland would," Tverberg said.

"You have almost a built-in transportation system in the sense because you're surrounded by water," she said. "You could put boats in the water (to deliver things to other parts of the island). You don't have to depend on these roads which are just about impossible to maintain."

The biggest concern that faces the island is the likely decline in air travel, which will cut into Hawaii County's biggest industry, tourism, as well as lower the state income level, Tverberg said.

Imports will continue to cost more or become unavailable, she said.

Kaya said the island needs to achieve maximum energy efficiency via a stronger emphasis on solar water heating systems, photovoltaic systems and energy-efficient homes based on federal Environmental Protection Agency standards.

"The council members should avoid being swayed by those who raise arguments (against this)," Kaya said. "I've seen this happen time and time again."

The government also needs to put more pressure on Hawaii Electric Light Co. to use more renewable energy sources, such as geothermal, wind and hydro-generated energy, he said.

HELCO President Jay Ignacio said the island's electricity supplier has been moving toward becoming less dependent on foreign fuels by resorting to renewable energy forms.

In 2007, he said 69 percent of electricity generated was with fossil fuels, while the remaining 31 percent was derived from wind farms, hydro-electric systems and geothermal power sources, he said.

This year to date, Ignacio said 35 percent of electricity generated by HELCO is through renewable energy sources.

He said HELCO is entertaining proposals to use bio-mass technologies to produce electricity but that he cannot yet make the details public.

Although some people believe HELCO should consider dismantling its fossil fuel units, Ignacio said that would be a wrong move in the event the electricity provider begins to use biofuels in the future.

Council Chairman Pete Hoffmann, Kohala, claimed the county has "made great strides in the past 18 months regarding our energy policy program." He said the council, working with the Kohala Center, was able to produce a 100-page-plus energy sustainability plan.