

## Reality check

By Kristine Kubat

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It was a day-long gathering of experts as well as business and political players on the subject of Hawai'i's energy future and it began with a list of woes titled "Economic implications of the rising prices and diminishing supplies of liquid fossil fuel."

Accredited actuary Gail Tverberg brought gloomy forecasts with her from the mainland where she makes her living calculating risks to establish dividends and annuity rates. Not only is America in a recession but she predicts that recession "is likely to be permanent," and result in a "zero-growth economy." Not only have oil and its byproducts infiltrated every tier of our society but we are going to have to sacrifice our quality of life as these commodities dwindle. One of Tverberg's closing pages in her PowerPoint presentation included this bit of advice -- "keep our fingers crossed."

During this 45-minute talk, attendee Zach Mermel rotated through his own presentation on a laptop. Destined for some other audience on some other day, the files that comprised his "Permaculture: Solutions for energy descent" provided a stark contrast to the message coming from the stage at the Hilo Hawaiian's Moku Olu Room. Sitting behind Mermel, Kona resident

Kelly Greenwell fought off sleep as he whispered that Tverberg was introduced earlier by Richard Ha, founder and owner of Hamakua Springs Country Farms, as the most important person he met at an epiphany-inspiring peak oil forum in Texas.

Tverberg did her best to end on a positive note. Her advice to Hawai'i residents: Look to small steps multiplied on a massive scale as the best way to mitigate impacts.



Makena Coffman, Ph.D. - Courtesy Kanu Hawai'i



Highway robbery. - Chris Madden

As the day progressed, assessing how Tverberg's message affected people made for an easy measure of where they stood on the energy future reality curve.

Next up on the agenda came the bright faced Dr. Makena Coffman discussing the economic implications of oil's rising prices and diminishing supplies for Hawai`i -- what she described as "the most oil-dependent state in the nation."

As one who makes her living planning for the future rather than second-guessing it, Coffman added those who believe "we are not running out of oil fast enough" to the equation. While her facts jibed with Tverberg's, Coffman presented them in a more optimistic context as she suggested that the shift from an oil-based economy is fraught with opportunity.

The professor with UH-Manoa's Department of Urban and Regional Planning divided her 30 minutes on stage between detailing how oil gets refined and consumed here and reporting on Act 234.

First, she stressed that the standard procedures for cracking crude dictate the cost and availability of fuel to a variety of end users in the islands, claiming that the process "is not being looked at enough" in terms of economic relief.

Then Coffman did a 180, turning to a discussion of what she called Hawai`i's "Kyoto-like policy" on global warming. From this point, her message was all about "achieving 1990 levels by 2020." By this she meant reducing Hawai`i's greenhouse gas footprint over the next 12 years to what it was 18 years ago in accordance with Act 234's mandate.

Coffman produced evidence that the difference would amount to a 7.5 percent reduction in emissions -- not that much in her eyes -- then went on to discuss mechanisms for achieving the goal. Act 234 effectively sets a cap on emissions. What remains to be seen is whether polluters will be allowed to trade debits they accrue by emitting greenhouse gases for carbon reducing credits generated elsewhere. The alternative is what Coffman called an "administratively simple" carbon tax system. She also saw the possibility of national legislation as a monkey wrench in even the best laid local plans and reported that she is part of a "task force that is still grappling with the issues."

Absent from Coffman's presentation was a discussion of the implication of efficiency measures. In a question and answer period after her talk, she mentioned readily available efficiency gains as a primary way to achieve the greenhouse gas reductions set in Act 234.

After listening to these national and local perspectives, forum attendees took a break to work their legs and jaws. Many were dazed by the break neck speed of Coffman's delivery and admitted that most of her details went over their heads. Others were dismayed by Tverberg's comments, especially her claims that agricultural productivity is dependent on oil byproducts when it is just as well served by organic inputs.

While it seemed most of those who understood the gravity of the current situation were anxious to hear about positive solutions, at the same time they hoped the actuary's presentation got through to those in the room who lagged on the reality curve, those who had come to the forum in denial.