

Don't wait to adapt to global warming

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Oct 20, 2011

As nations around the world have been consumed by dealing with economic crises, attention to global climate change has been pushed aside. Next month's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Honolulu should give due importance to concerns voiced at a pre-summit climate symposium here that economic strategies need to recognize environmental reality.

The World Bank has put forth its expectation that climate change will affect developing countries the hardest as they cope with precipitation patterns, rising sea levels and more weather-related disasters, posing risks for agriculture, food and water supplies. The consequences of poverty, hunger and disease already are being felt.

"We are now at the point that it's indisputable that the climate is changing, even as the scientific community refines how much and where," APEC's climate symposium heard on Monday from keynote speaker Rosina Bierbaum, dean of the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources and Environment. "We already know that the changes that are occurring are serious enough that we need to adapt."

More than 50 climate scientists from Pacific nations have gathered this week at the East-West Center in Manoa, drawing a rally organized by the Hawaiian Independence Action Alliance. The demonstrators mainly called for "fair trade," as opposed to "free trade," and human rights and fundamental freedom, although their organizer added that APEC should listen to the people of low island Pacific nations coping with rising sea levels. That issue should be more than an aside.

Two years ago, President Barack Obama issued a report that foresaw "enormous effects" on Hawaii and other Pacific islands caused by melting Arctic ice. It noted that Honolulu Harbor experienced its highest daily average sea level ever recorded in September 2003 and predicted that "coastal land will be permanently lost."

The report blamed greenhouse-gas emissions as "primarily" responsible for global warming and called for rapid action to prevent catastrophic changes in water, heat and natural life. Obama's Environmental Protection Agency chief called at the time for a stiffer standard for ozone, the main ingredient in smog, to protect public health. On Tuesday, environmental groups sued the Obama administration over its rejection of a proposed stricter standard for ozone pollution and continuation of the ozone standard set by the George W. Bush administration.

Bierbaum, a member of Obama's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, told the APEC climate symposium that it needs to examine the effect of climate change and "translate that information to what is vulnerable in society and how we can prepare for it."

Governments adopting wiser environmental policies to cap future emissions are one thing; how societies adapt to climate changes already occurring are another important aspect. Among the actions to be mined: Dealing with drought conditions with xeriscape techniques, sustainable crops rotation, reducing consumer dependence on fossil fuels, improving water-use efficiency, and shoreline protection via bulkheads or beach nourishment.

Throughout the world, the immediate economic problems are the recognized priority, and that won't change soon — but the APEC delegates and other leaders must recognize environmental policies and actions as critical elements not only in the far future but the immediate present.

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