

Island's energy future is in focus

Geothermal source could power Big Isle

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Geothermal is safe, clean and a gift of nature to residents of the Big Island, members of the 11-member Geothermal Working Group said.

Established by a state Senate resolution, nine of the group's members met Wednesday afternoon in Hilo for the first time. Over the next seven months, they are charged with delivering a report to the Legislature on the ambitious goal of making Hawaii County energy independent.

Their goal, as stated in the resolution, is to "analyze the potential development of geothermal energy as the primary energy source to meet the baseload demand for electricity on the Big Island."

Members included representatives from the state, Hawaii County, environmental and Hawaiian interests, business and labor sectors, Hawaii Electric Light Co., West Hawaii and the Public Utilities Commission.

Co-chairs Richard Ha and Wallace Ishibashi spoke of the challenges facing oil-dependent Hawaii and the promises of geothermal energy.

"The end of cheap oil is upon us," Ha said during the meeting, held on the second-floor lanai of the Hawaii County Building. "The less fortunate among us are the most vulnerable."

Geothermal, on the other hand, is "proven technology. It's cheap and it's a gift for us to use wisely," Ha said.

Ishibashi praised geothermal energy as "very effective and very clean," and said money saved on the electricity bill meant more money in residents' pockets.

The group is also charged with considering:

- The environmental impacts of geothermal expansion on native habitats and Hawaiian values and practices;
- Improvements for the electric transmission system and getting federal funds to do so;
- The feasibility of using geothermal energy as the main energy source on the Big Island;
- The possibility of establishing a community benefits package to distribute royalties from energy production; and
- An accounting of the collection and use of geothermal royalties collected by the state, the county and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs.

The working group will file an interim report with the Legislature prior to the start of the 2011 session, and will file a final report with lawmakers before the start of the 2012 session.

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