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CUC exploring sea solar power

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Caribbean Utilities Company will explore harnessing the geothermal power of the ocean in a prototype programme that is the first of its kind in the Caribbean.

The project was outlined at the monthly Cayman Chamber of Commerce luncheon held at the Wharf Restaurant in George Town Wednesday.

Ocean Thermal Energy Conversion, or OTEC, harnesses the energy generated from turbines powered by the temperature difference between the Caribbean Sea's warm surface layers and the cold water at its bottom depths. The deep waters around Cayman provide an ideal environment for the project.

"This isn't really new, we signed a [memorandum of understanding] with Sea Solar Power several years ago," said Richard Hew, CUC's president and CEO.

However, Mr. Hew said Sea Solar Power's technology had progressed, making the project closer to reality.

The OTEC system not only produces energy from the condensation and vaporization process involved, but also large quantities of fresh potable water, making it an even more attractive system for the Cayman Islands.

The prototype plant will likely be in place within two years. It will be the first such plant in the Caribbean.

Another plant is located in Hawaii, but it only had limited success. It is hoped the Cayman plant, with its ideal location, will be even more successful.

If it is successful here, OTEC will produce a steady stream of electricity.

"OTEC is better than other forms of alternative power in that it wouldn't be intermittent like wind and solar," Mr. Hew said.

On very calm days, wind generators would not generate, and solar generators do not generate at night or on very cloudy days. OTEC generates electricity continually.

Mr. Hew emphasised the project had a way to go before it was reality, but it was worth the effort.

"Our position is, if this is going to work, we want it here first," he said.

During the luncheon, Mr. Hew, CUC Customer Service Manager Joey Ebanks, and Edison Electric Institute Media Relations Director Jim Owen also discussed current energy and electricity issues affecting the Cayman Islands during the luncheon.

Mr. Hew said the current challenges faced by the CUC in light of rising oil prices which are not anticipated to cease their upward trend. The costs of materials needed for improving Cayman Islands energy infrastructure are also expected to keep rising.

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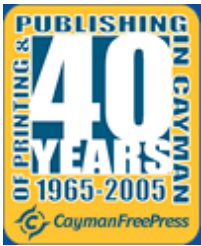
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Despite this, Mr. Hew said the Cayman Islands are presenting a competitive level of service availability, and the CUC is currently engaging in constructive dialogue with a government negotiating team with regard to dealing with rising fuel costs. “We have even been able to keep costs down during periods of high inflation,” he added. “Electricity costs have not been rising nearly as quickly as the Cayman Islands’ cost of living.”

Efficiency is playing a significant role in the CUC’s ability to meet demand in the Cayman Islands.

There has been efficiency improvement on the the transmission and distribution side, Mr. Hew said.

“We have been able to achieve a six per cent improvement in our generation efficiency – in converting diesel into electricity,” he said.. “That may not sound like much, but it’s a significant reduction considering that we use approximately 70,000 imperial gallons of diesel fuel to power our generators every day.”

Furthermore, CUC is now employing high efficiency distribution transformers.

Meeting demand and cutting electricity bills, however, is now not only up to the CUC, but to consumers. Mr. Ebanks, who heads up CUC’s Energy Smart Programme, discussed the measures residents might consider taking not only to reduce their electricity bills, but also to ease demand on CUC’s generation capabilities.

“We encourage Caymanians to employ what is known as the Energy Efficient Envelope in their homes,” he said.

This includes, wherever possible, installing radiant barriers, Styrofoam sheeting, insulating attics with a material with an R-value of 30 or greater, installing solid exterior doors and energy efficient windows, installing central air units with a SEER rating of 12 or more, and practicing at-home energy efficiency.

“For example, turn ceiling fans off when you’re not in the room as they don’t actually cool your home,” he said. “A single fan running day and night will cost you \$22.00 a month. And set your air conditioner on a timer so it only comes on as you’re driving home from work,”

Mr. Ebanks also had other suggestions.

“Invest in high–efficiency appliances, use compact fluorescent bulbs and turn off and unplug where possible anything you are not using. The energy – and cost – savings will be substantial.”

Although the CUC cannot offer any rebates on energy efficient appliance purchases, Mr. Hew advised luncheon attendees that the savings would offset the cost of the new appliance within a year.

The luncheon attendees also heard about the need for the Cayman Islands to supplement current energy supply with alternatives such as solar and wind.

These technologies are in their infancy, and, Mr. Owen explained, the development of these technologies is growing relatively slowly due to the absence of regulatory programs that would mandate their widespread use.

“All alternatives have their pluses and minuses”, he said. “However, the United States’ 2005 Energy Policy Act has set many new regulations and guidelines that will have a big impact on the development of alternative energy technologies in the future.”

Fuel diversity and the options for energy alternatives in the Cayman Islands are limited at present, but all speakers expressed hope that by working together with consumers and with international partners, CUC will continue to successfully meet the energy needs of the Cayman Islands.



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