The Virgin Islands Consortium

Cap On Use Of Solar Energy To Be Raised Territory Wide

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St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands -- Elmo Roebuck, Jr., director of the Virgin Islands Energy Office, Tuesday at a Caribbean Clean Energy Technology Symposium pre-gathering organized by his office, told *VI Consortium* that new legislation would soon be set in place to amend the current law to raise the net metering cap from five megawatts on St. Croix to 10, and from 10 megawatts in the St. Thomas-St. John district to an amount that is yet to be determined.

The increase would accommodate more residents wanting to make the move to solar energy.

"We are amending the [net metering program] legislation right now to create more capacity. It's a reset thing. You put it in place the first time, you reach the maximum capacity, now it's time to go back in and reset it," Roebuck said.

Net metering is a system in which solar panels or other renewable energy generators are connected to a public-utility power grid and surplus power is transferred onto the grid, allowing customers to offset the cost of power drawn from the utility.

St. Croix's current five megawatts net metering capacity has already been reached,
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... rids to solar energy.

Elmo Roebuck, Jr., director of the Virgin Islands Energy Office

Speaking of the original net metering legislation, Roebuck said a cap was necessary because "not everyone can afford photovoltaic solar panels." He explained that the idea is to gradually make available more megawatts as the renewable energy industry becomes more affordable. Furthermore, Roebuck pointed out that if the net metering program was without a cap, and a great portion of the territory's residents decided to make the move to solar energy, it would be almost impossible for WAPA to function, which would then leave residents who could not afford to make the switch from the public utility's power grids to solar without any form of energy.

"But the industry is starting to get a little seasoned and panels are coming down and more people are being able to afford solar panels, so we have to kind of monitor that in conjunction with how much is coming off the grid as well, so it's a balancing act," Roebuck said.

He also pointed out that the solar energy industry is not yet fully developed.

"If you go through a cycle of cloud coverage, you're not going to have reliable solar," Roebuck explained.

He further pointed out that the rationale behind the new legislation is to help the territory become more energy efficient, while ensuring WAPA is not rendered useless.

"You don't want to destroy your utility," he said. "I mean, let's face it, we're still depending on fossil fuel, without our utility we have nothing. But we are adding other alternative energy sources."

The energy director said the idea is to have a well-rounded plan where no one source of energy is solely relied upon and no potential source is neglected. To that end, Roebuck revealed that the energy office has performed wind studies on both St. Croix and St. Thomas, and that there is potential for the energy source in the near future.

"We have performed wind studies on [St. Croix and St. Thomas]," he said, "and the results are, we know where the wind is, and there's near-future potential."

The Caribbean Clean Energy Technology Symposium is being jointly hosted by Caribbean Central American Action, the United States Department of Energy, and the Government of the United States Virgin Islands to explore the role of clean energy technology in the region. It officially opens today and continues through Fri., March 27 at the Frenchman's Reef & Morningstar Marriot Beach Resort on St. Thomas.