

Surf, sand and solar power — the future of Samoa

Catherine Wilson in Apia

The most powerful solar energy installation in the Pacific Islands, substantially funded by the New Zealand Government, was launched in Apia this week.

Increasing access to renewable energy in the region “will reduce the money spent on diesel fuel, free up government funds for other development priorities and ultimately make Pacific nations more self-reliant”, said Foreign Minister Murray McCully, who was at the Monday launch with Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Aiono Sailele Malielegaoi and European Development Commissioner Andris Piebalgs.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and about 3000 world delegates were also in town for a four-day international conference on sustainable development.

The 2.2 megawatt photovoltaic array covers the roof of the Apia Sports

Complex, which was the primary venue of the UN Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States which began on Monday and finished on Thursday.

Electricity from the site will be distributed to the main island of Upolu and Manono where more than 70 per cent of the population of 190,372 live.

It is the second of three solar projects resulting from a renewable energy partnership signed between Samoa and New Zealand last year with an investment of \$7.5 million from New Zealand. For Samoa, it represents a step toward reducing exorbitant fuel bills and addressing climate change through the use of cleaner energy.

EPC general manager Tologata Tile Leia Tuimalealiifano said the three New Zealand-funded projects “will power some 4800 domestic households and go some way to saving 1.1 million litres of diesel or 3.4 million tala (\$1.7 million) annually”.

Fuel comprises approximately 17.6 per cent of Samoa’s total imports and is used for 70 per cent of Samoa’s electricity needs, with hydropower 30 per cent.

Across the Pacific Islands region, 80 per cent of energy is derived from fossil fuels and less than 10 per cent from renewable sources. Fuel importation amounts to 10 per cent of the region’s GDP.

The solar energy projects in Samoa are supported by the EU-NZ Energy Access Partnership, a joint initiative by the European Union, New Zealand and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and an outcome of the Pacific Energy Summit held in Auckland in March last year.

Following the summit, the New Zealand Government committed more than \$80 million for 25 renewable energy projects in the Cook Islands, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Vanuatu.



Murray McCully

According to the ADB, approximately 30 per cent of the region’s population of 10 million have access to electricity. Many Pacific Island states lack nationwide power grids due to the prohibitive costs of expanding infrastructure to reach small island-based communities scattered across vast distances.

“Many small island developing states have renewable resources in abundance, but lack the capital needed to invest in the initial infrastructure,” McCully said.

“New Zealand has significant expertise in developing renewable energy generation. It therefore made sense for us to focus our development effort on renewable energy.”

Renewable energy is seen as a sustainable and affordable means to provide lighting, refrigeration, clean cooking, education and health services and improve human development outcomes across the Pacific region.