Messages of action resonate with crowds inside and outside the East-West Center

By Susan Essoyan

The world needs to do more than simply reduce emissions, it has to take action to adapt to climate change, the keynote speaker at Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Climate Symposium 2011 told scientists Monday, as activists gathered outside with signs ranging from "Stop Global Warming" to "APEC = Greed."

"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," said 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. It's not either reducing emissions or adapting and coping. No, we need to do both."

Bierbaum spoke at APEC's symposium, where more than 50 climate scientists from Pacific nations are presenting their research. The four-day meeting, a prelude to the APEC leaders' conference in Honolulu next month, included technical presentations focusing on topics such as cloud microphysics and statistical models of climate change. It is hosted by the University of Hawaii at Manoa and is being held at the East-West Center.

During the symposium's lunch break, a group of more than 30 people marched around the center, stopping in its manicured Japanese garden in view of the delegates' dining room, holding hand-painted cardboard signs. The rally included Hawaiian nationalists as well as people opposed to corporate greed, echoing the Wall Street protests but tailoring their message to APEC.

The Hawaiian Independence Action Alliance helped organize the rally in an effort to ensure that indigenous voices are heard by APEC, said Poka Laenui, an alliance leader. Rather than "free trade" as advocated by APEC, he said, the group supports "fair trade" with reasonable wages and work conditions for all and the right to organize.

"Oftentimes people misconstrue it as a protest," Laenui said. "What we are doing is rallying to express ourselves, trying to give some direction to APEC. We believe in globalization of human rights and fundamental freedoms, in the right to maintain a people's culture without transnational capitalism swooping in and taking over the mom-and-pop stores, the saimin stands."

Laenui, who heard Bierbaum's speech, said it was "well documented and well presented," but he said APEC needs to listen to the people of the low island nations of the Pacific that are on the front lines of rising sea levels.

In her presentation, Bierbaum, a member of the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, highlighted the devastating impact that climate change will have in developing countries.

"The poorest of the world are the ones that climate change will affect the most," said Bierbaum, who recently helped produce a report for the World Bank that assessed the impact of climate change on 13 of the earth's main crops. "Many of the tropical countries, already poor and subject to famine, could experience up to 50 percent losses in productivity."
Bierbaum also called on scientists to provide information that communities can use to prepare infrastructure and land-use plans, for example. "We need not just to figure out what the science says, but to actually translate that information to what is vulnerable in society and how we can prepare for it," she said.

Hawaii News Now video: APEC protests begin at global warming meeting

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