

Ige eyeing HECO to cool schools

An air-conditioning proposal would repay the utility through a fee on customer bills

By Kevin Dayton
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Gov. David Ige has been contemplating a plan to have Hawaiian Electric Co. install air conditioning in the public schools that need it, and to reimburse the utility for the cost of the program through a fee tacked on to utility customers' bills, the Honolulu Star-Advertiser has learned.

Cindy McMillan, director of communications for Ige, confirmed the administration has been working on "dynamic and changing" plans to provide air conditioning for schools, but said she was unable to provide any details. If the administration were to announce any such initiative, it would likely be during the governor's State of the State address on Monday, she said.

Ige Chief of Staff Mike McCartney said through McMillan that it is "incorrect" that the administration intends to have the utilities handle the air-conditioning work, and to reimburse them with a new charge on ratepayers.

However, Public Utilities Commission Chairman Randy Iwase said he has heard about the proposal, which was a subject of much discussion last week among both government and utility officials. Iwase declined to discuss the details because "it's the governor's policy call," and the issue could eventually come before the commission for consideration.

If the Ige administration does seek a surcharge on utility bills to finance air conditioning for the schools, it could pursue the initiative either by asking for PUC approval, or by asking the state Legislature to change state law to establish a surcharge on consumers for that purpose, Iwase said.

Iwase's wife, Jan, is the principal at Hale Kula Elementary School at Schofield

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WILDFIRES IN HAWAII



KRYSTLE MARCELLUS / 2014

Firefighters battled a brush fire in upper Makakilo in August 2014. Authorities later determined that the fire was started by two boys playing with a lighter.

Oahu hit hard by blazes, data show

With an average of 600 per year, the heavily populated isle "is off the charts"

By Gary T. Kubota
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Oahu leads the Hawaiian Islands in the number of annual wildfires, which sometimes threaten homes, watersheds and native forests, University of Hawaii researchers have found. And the frequency of the fires is increasing, they said.

Clay Trauernicht and Creighton Litton of UH's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources were among a group of re-

searchers who found that heavily populated areas in Hawaii were more prone to have wildfires.

"People don't typically think of wildfire as a frequent disturbance on tropical islands," said Trauernicht in a UH release Friday.

But between 2005 and 2011, there were about 1,007 wildfires statewide that burned an average of about 20,000 acres, the researchers found.

A 108-year history showed a more-than-fourfold increase in acreage burned annually statewide, they found.

While lightning is a significant cause of brush and forest fires on the mainland, the vast majority of

wildfires in Hawaii are started by humans, Trauernicht and colleagues said.

On Oahu, the average number was about 600 wildfires annually — many were small, under 10 acres, Trauernicht said by telephone Saturday.

"Oahu is off the charts," he said, adding that Maui averaged about 200 wildfires annually.

He said every once in a while, a large brush fire occurs, such as the Wai'alua wildfire in 2007 that scorched an estimated 6,700 acres. That one was in hilly, rough terrain that challenged firefighters.

Observers say in Hawaii, more homes being built near open brush land sometimes force firefight-

ers to place themselves dangerously between the fires and houses.

Also, as agricultural companies in Hawaii abandon farm ventures, firefighters find themselves battling the fires alone, without the benefit of agribusiness bulldozers and other heavy equipment.

On Maui, Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar crews and bulldozer operators cut firebreaks, especially when an unscheduled sugar cane fire occurred.

Maui County Fire Services Chief Edward Taomoto said the absence of Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar, Hawaii's last plantation, will be felt by firefighters. The company has said it will halt operations

within a year.

"Once they're gone, it's going to be tough," Taomoto said.

Last week, a brush fire burned about 200 acres and halted traffic periodically on Thursday and Friday on the main highway near Maalaea, Maui. It was extinguished at 9:10 a.m. Saturday.

Taomoto said Saturday that an investigation failed to find the source of the fire, but he suspects it was unintentionally set.

In the study published in Pacific Science, Trauernicht and colleagues say humans have increased the incidence of wildfires across the state not only by

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Fewer than 10 percent of the state's 256 public schools have central air conditioning for all classrooms. The state Department of Education purchased hundreds of portable air conditioners last year for the state's hottest classrooms, and has installed

it. Many of the state's older schools would also need upgrades in their electrical systems to handle the additional load.

Hawaii State Teachers Association President Corey Rosenlee declined to comment on the Ige administration's plans until he has more information about how the state plans to proceed.

decades in Hawaii," he said.

Rosenlee said he has seen a better effort by the DOE to respond to the problem this year, "but I'm afraid that when the temperatures go down a little they won't see it as big of an emergency, and this is something that we cannot wait another two decades to try to solve," he said.

Meeting to address Big Isle park plan

Star-Advertiser staff

The state Department of Land and Natural Resources will hold an open house on Saturday to go over plans to balance recreational use with the preservation of cultural and historical sites at Kealahou Bay State Historical Park on Hawaii island.

Curt Cottrell, DLNR state parks administrator, said in a news release, "We've made

a concerted effort to integrate planning for the bay and ocean recreation with the land-based park and the concerns of the local community."

The 4-acre park is the site of the first extensive contact between Hawaiians and Westerners with the arrival of Capt. James Cook in 1778.

The open house, slated for 1 to 2:30 p.m. at Konawaena Elementary School, 81-901

Onouli Road, Kealahou, will be followed by a discussion from 2:30 to 4 p.m.

DLNR's Division of State Parks is hosting the event in partnership with Belt Collins Hawaii as part of the planning process for the park's master plan update and an environmental impact statement. Materials can be reviewed at dlnr.hawaii.gov/dsp/. Comments will be accepted until Feb. 28.

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setting them — purposefully or accidentally — but by introducing fire-prone plant species, especially non-native grasses.

Trauernicht said incident commanders involved in fighting wildfires would like

more training for firefighters. The report also quotes fire officials as expressing hope that more preventive measures could be taken, such as the development of more firebreaks and an increase in grazing to reduce the amount of fuel in grassy areas.

Co-authors of the report, "The Contemporary Scale and Context of Wildfire in

Hawaii," are Elizabeth Pickett of the Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization in Waimea on Hawaii island; Christian Giardina and Susan Cordell of the Institute of Pacific Islands Forestry, part of the Forest Service in Hilo; and Andrew Beavers of the Center for Environmental Management of Military Lands at Colorado State University.

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