

Isles' government policies on sea level rise are too strict, and should be eased

(Honolulu Star Advertiser "Island Voices" Article, July 12, 2026)

By Bruce Plasch and Clint Churchill

Implausible. That's the recent finding regarding climate projections which underlie and permeate both State of Hawaii and county policies regarding sea level rise (SLR). Government agencies have issued guidance on SLR that has now been shown to be invalid.

In 2018, the Hawaii's Climate Change Commission issued guidance that land-use and infrastructure planning for Hawaii should be based on a projected 3.2-foot SLR by 2100 relative to 2000. In late 2022 the Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) further recommended that, for 2100, a "benchmark of 4 ft ... as the minimum scenario for all planning and design ..., and a 6 ft benchmark for planning and design of public infrastructure projects." Such hypothetical projections assume rapidly increasing CO2 emissions which, in turn, would lead to warmer temperatures, melting glaciers and ice sheets, and thermal expansion of seawater.

These SLR projections have had, and will have, hugely expensive implications for where homes can and cannot be built, the routing of roads and utilities, the cost of homes, and more. Recent examples include: (1) the blighting of 47 of 80 acres of DHHL land at Ewa Beach (two blocks from the ocean) as unsuitable for building homes, (2) controversy regarding renovating and upgrading Hawaiian Electric's Waiau power plant, (3) restrictions on rebuilding Lahaina, and (4) recent 50% increases in shoreline-setback requirements on Oahu, Maui, and Kauai .

There are two major problems invalidating these SLR projections. First, they are based on an extreme scenario published by the United Nations International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2015. Termed RCP8.5, it "modeled" catastrophic warming of up to 10°F by 2100 compared to pre-industrial levels, and was the original source of the projected 3.2-foot SLR.

RCP8.5 was seized on by scientists worldwide, becoming the basis for tens of thousands of research papers and used to influence government policy. There has been no exception to the use of this scenario in Hawaii to influence policy.

But the RCP8.5 scenario modeled a future with almost no climate policies,

worldwide population growth of more than 50%, and some 40,000 new coal plants globally. It largely disregarded the ongoing transition from coal to natural gas, the significant worldwide renewable energy effort, improvements in energy efficiencies, and the significant decline in U.S. CO2 emissions since 2006.

In response to strong criticism by climate scientists, in April 2026 the IPCC scientists responsible for designing climate scenarios formally retired RCP8.5, declaring it “implausible.” The IPCC confirmed its retirement a month later. Scientist Roger Pielke, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, commented, “we now know that all of this is built on a foundation of sand.”

Because RCP8.5 has been officially declared implausible, all related projections are implausible as well, including the State’s SLR projections.

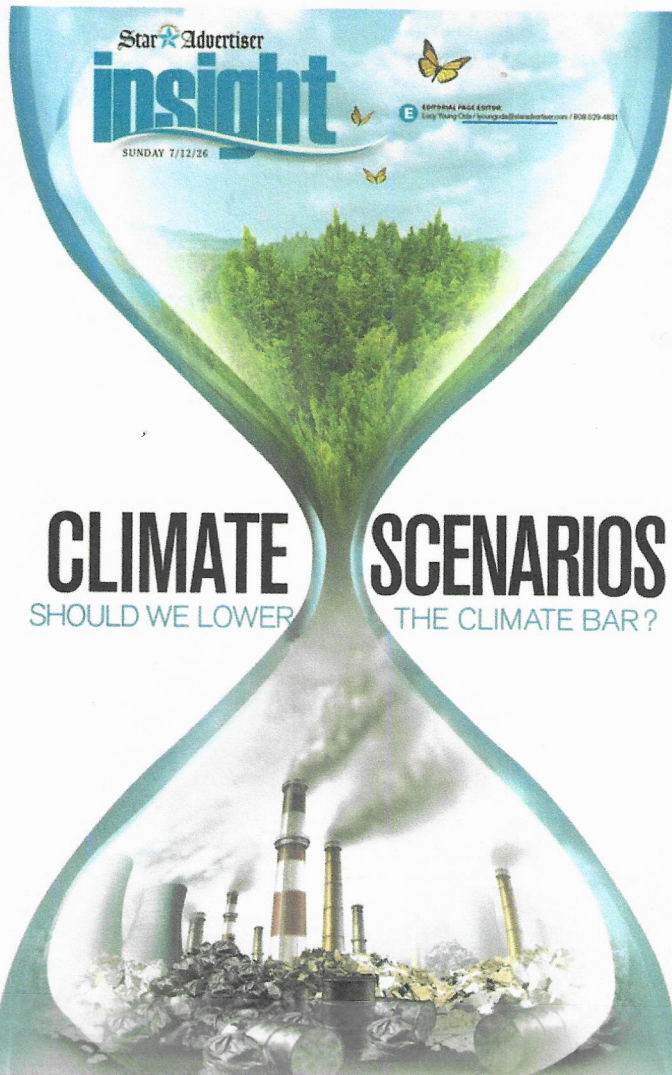
The second major problem invalidating the State’s SLR projections is tide data for Honolulu (search “NOAA, Relative Sea Level Trend, Honolulu”). For at least 120 years, annual SLR for Honolulu has averaged the thickness of a penny; at this rate, the increase from 2000 to 2100 will be 6.2 inches. Not 3.2 feet, not 4 feet, and certainly not 6 feet.

To date, there is no sign in the Honolulu tide data that SLR has or will transition from its slow linear growth to the extremely rapid acceleration assumed in the State’s SLR projections.

Hawaii should follow the lead of the IPCC scientists and formally retire its SLR projections as implausible since it too is built on the RCP8.5 foundation of sand. Guidance for SLR should be based on realistic, fact-based projections, not discredited models.

Climate change is real, and sea levels in Hawai‘i are rising ever-so-slowly. While we should take practical action to adapt, we should not allow ourselves to be misled into costly and unnecessary restrictions that negatively impact life in Hawaii.

Economist Bruce Plasch, Ph.D. and retired businessman Clint Churchill represent the Practical Policy Institute of Hawaii.



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CLIMATE SCENARIOS

SHOULD WE LOWER THE CLIMATE BAR?

FRESHIDEA / ADOBE STOCK

YES

NO

Ding-Dong! Implausible RCP8.5 climate scenario is dead, so amend climate acts

By Michael N. Hansen

ISLAND VOICES

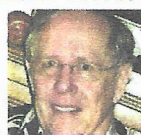


Michael N. Hansen is president of the Hawaii Shippers' Council, representing merchant cargo owners, and an independent consultant on maritime business.

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Please see EASE, E4

Rolling back climate scenario does not roll back climate risks for Earth or for Hawaii

By Chip Fletcher

ISLAND VOICES



Chip Fletcher is dean of the University of Hawaii at Manoa's School of Ocean and Earth Science and Technology.

EASE

Continued from E1

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