Don't blame climate change for fires

(Honolulu Star-Advertiser Insight Article, September 24, 2023)

By Clint Churchill and John S.S. Kim

The devastating Lahaina fire was an unimaginable tragedy that leaves us all heartsick.

While we understandably seek an explanation of the causes, should climate change be among them?

Let's review the pertinent data. Analyses at www.practicalpolicy.org, based on National Weather Service data, provide historic trends for Honolulu temperature and rainfall together with Central Pacific hurricane frequency. As for temperature, what readers will find is a 50-year trendline showing an average increase of 3/10 of 1 degree Fahrenheit per decade.

As for precipitation, readers will find two informative trend lines; the first shows a slightly declining 50- year trend. But analysis of the most recent 25 years shows an increasing rainfall trend. Thus, over a period of about 35 years, exactly flat.

Hurricanes reaching the Central Pacific from the Eastern Pacific over the past 50 years have averaged four per year. But the trend has been almost exactly flat, with a slight decline. And the past three years have been below the trend line.

In summary, three all-but-flat trendlines. Our hope is that readers will apply their own critical thinking on the matter—as opposed to repeating assertions of others without question.

We all know that the earth is currently going through a warm spell. But is fossil fuel usage the cause or is it due to variations in nature's weather? The innuendo--even a United Nations definition--when we hear the term "climate change," linked to almost every weather event, is human causation. How can that be since we all know the weather has always changed, well before fossil fuel usage.

The climate change narrative has one supposed evildoer, CO2 from fossil fuels. But this sidesteps by far the most abundant and important greenhouse gas in the atmosphere, nature's water vapor—measured by absolute humidity, not relative humidity. Enter the need for "self-educating" about greenhouse gases, which, coupled with the sun's infrared radiation, cause warming. We again encourage readers to visit the informational postings in the referenced website.

Readers will find that for a typical Hawaii day, when water vapor is 2% of the atmosphere, the ratio of water vapor to CO2 is 47 to 1. Even more significantly, 143 to 1 relative to the increase in CO2 since 1800—an increase amounting to less than 2/100ths of 1% of the atmosphere. So how can the overwhelming differential between the two greenhouse gases be explained away?

The climate narrative postulates theories like amplification, feedback loops, and re-remitted heat. Determining what and who to believe leads to the need for even more self-education. Readers should further explore the referenced website for two easy-to-understand graphs about the sun's infrared radiation.

What, then, is causing the current hot spell? First, the earth has been gradually warming for hundreds of years from natural causes. Second, there will always be variability to weather patterns plus natural causes such as volcanic emissions. For example, the January 2022 Tonga eruption, according to NOAA, increased water vapor in the atmosphere by about 10 percent—which will contribute to global warming for the next five years.

So, what to do? To combat climate change (actually "weather change"), our legislature has been pursuing CO2 emissions. Two consequential state laws, 100% renewable energy and net zero emissions, both by 2045, have effectively been marching orders to the Public Utilities Commission and Hawaiian Electric. Wouldn't it have been more prudent to focus resources on preparation for and adaptation to weather change? As a recent Pacific Business News editorial concluded: "As a matter of policy, we've been sacrificing basic resource management in favor of the climate crusade. That falls on lawmakers, and on all of us for letting them do so."

Out of respect for those lives tragically lost in Lahaina, we suggest an end to the opportunistic rhetoric that the disaster was caused by climate change.

Retired businessman Clint Churchill and retired U.S. Air Force meteorologist John Kim represent the Practical Policy Institute of Hawaii

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COURTESY ALAN BARRIOS

Apartments on Front Street burned in Lahaina on Aug. 8.

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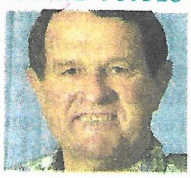
ISLAND VOICES



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