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RP: Leading Asia in climate change

Blessed with such alternate clean energy sources as geothermal, hydropower, wind, solar and ocean waves, the Philippines got off to a head start on clean energy by developing geothermal plants in the 1970's.

But the momentum was not sustained. The cost of bringing in a plant was high, and when oil prices dropped, the program stopped. The Department of Energy's 10-year plan, which was adopted in 2003, aims to achieve 40 percent self sufficiency in renewable energy and is already at 33 percent, with 22 percent of that from geothermal power.

The Renewable Energy Act of 2008 was the first such legislation in Asia, and paved the way for rapid development of alternate energy sources. Besides cutting back on carbon emissions, it saves on the cost of imported oil, and is an important source of foreign investment. On President Arroyo's recent trip to Brazil contracts were signed for developing bio-energy and bioethanol plants.

Today a beach in Ilocos Norte is the site of the first and largest wind farm in southeast Asia, built by Danish Northwind Power Development Corporation. The Philippines has a potential of 76,000 megawatts of wind power.

Great Britain has been an investor in energy, and the latest contract by Global Green Power Corp., is to develop three 15-MW biomass plants simultaneously in Panay, Nueva Ecija and Pangasinan which will provide 900 jobs and extra income for local farmers for agricultural waste. Two other British companies are exploring biomass and wind power projects.

At a recent renewable energy forum in Cebu, hosted by the World Wildlife Fund and funded by the British embassy, local governments were urged to press for alternate energy sources, by

opening their economies and offering incentives to investors. The mayor of Kananga, Leyte, Elmer Codilla, described the benefits his town has derived from the presence of geothermal plants. Kananga receives royalties based on gross receipts from the Energy Development Corp. as well as millions of pesos in annual taxes from the operation. Those revenues have resulted in funding projects in education, healthcare, agriculture, and infrastructure that have elevated the town into a first class municipality. At the forum British Ambassador Peter Beckingham commended the Philippines for tackling Climate Change with its Renewable Energy Law, which supports the goal of 60 percent self-sufficiency from alternate energy sources.

In a Building Green Conference held this past July, local architects agreed to establish their own standard for sustainable building based on Philippine climate and resources.

According to Architect Jay Ruiz who spoke for Palafox Associates, it is important when discussing investment to acknowledge that sustainable buildings will cost up to 20 percent more than other buildings.

But eventually they will save money because of lower electricity and fuel costs. Incentives and government support may be needed to encourage companies to “build green.” Examples of that are the “greenest city” in the world, Curitiba Brazil, and the conversion of Boston, Massachusetts to a predominately green city.

Historically, in the Philippines, an example of “green” architecture is the Philippine “Bahay kubo” a design dictated by the climate, using shade from trees, insulated roofs and cross ventilation. Modern green buildings use natural lighting to avoid electricity, are passively cooled, rather than relying on air conditioning, and collect rainwater to use for flushing toilets. And, like the Bahay Kubo, of the past, they rely on local materials which can be re-cycled.