



People living in low-lying atolls such as this in Budibudi will benefit from the district's plan to provide water desalination and purification. Picture courtesy of Sailblogs.com

Making briny water sweet again

By ALPHONSE BARIASI

MILNE BAY'S Samarai-Murua district, home to about 54,000 people, is the first to purchase Japanese water desalination and purification technology. The devices are a technological marvel local MP Isi Henry Leonard cannot wait to get more of to help his people who are threatened by climate change.

The electorate ranks among the most disadvantaged and difficult in terms of development efforts.

To put into perspective the sheer task of service delivery in this part of the country, here's a bit of geography. Samarai-Murua consists of four local level governments (LLGs) covering four major islands and a number of low-lying atolls bordering Solomon Islands and Australia.

Murua LLG is nearest the Solomon Islands, Louisiade comprises the main Misima Island, Bwanabwana comprises the southern-most tip of mainland PNG and Yeleyamba borders Australia's north.

To get to the district station at Misima from one of the far-flung atolls takes almost a week by boat and aircraft. It takes a long dinghy ride from one of the islands or atolls into Alotau for a plane ride to Misima. You'd be lucky if that round trip takes less than two weeks, says district chief executive officer Hayden Abraham.

Such are the logistical nightmares confronting government service delivery in Samarai-Murua.

Misima is where the district headquarters are located. There is an airstrip serviced by Dash 8 aircraft, a

rural hospital, and other government and commercial services. The other big islands are Woodlark, Sudest and Rossel.

Spread out between these islands is a number of atolls which are only one or two metres above sea level. The residents of these atolls are therefore most vulnerable to climate change and rising seas.

Climate change is real and witnessed everyday here. In the last country-wide el-nino, parts of Samarai-Murua reached crisis stage - Category 5 - which meant life-threatening conditions.

Fortunately, the rains fell and prevented further suffering.

In the face of such a grave scenario, MP Leonard easily got the DDA board to approve the purchase of water desalination and purification equipment in its last meeting.

On Monday, Leonard presented a cheque for K522,942 to Port Moresby-based company, Pacific International Ltd for two water desalination units.

With him were district CEO Abraham and finance officer Emmanuel Levi who shared the MP's joy of having made a potentially life-saving investment for island communities.

The two portable water desalination units will be delivered to Alotau then to Budibudi and Brooker Islands.

According to Leonard, these were the worst hit areas in the last drought and the water desalination units will provide clean water for the communities.

"These islands were not chosen randomly; they were the worst affected and were in Category 5 in the drought," the MP says.

The islands' water sources are



Samarai-Murua district CEO Hayden Abraham (left), MP Isi Henry Leonard and Pacific International Ltd project manager Jack Talai showing the payment for the water desalination equipment. Picture courtesy of Pacific International Ltd.

threatened both by dry spells and king tides which inundate fresh water holes with salt water.

"Water is fundamental. We can't sit back and watch these people struggle. We need appropriate technology to help them.

"The two desalination devices will come with wind turbines and solar panels to provide power to run them. Besides there will be enough power to run freezers so I will look to buying freezers to encourage families to catch and store fish in them to sell at the market.

"The beauty about these units is that they are the latest in Japanese technology and are reliable."

The units will be solar or wind-powered and used to desalinate water from existing water wells. Purified water will be stored in centrally-located holding tanks for villagers to draw from.

Leonard learnt of the water desalination equipment when he was invited by Pacific International project manager Jack Talai to a demonstration at Port Moresby's Koki fish market last October.

He watched as dirty sea water from Koki was desalinated, purified and

tested for bacteria and traces of salt using a World Health Organisation-approved technique.

"When I tasted the water, it was like fresh rain water. I thought, this is a solution for my people," the MP enthused.

Thus convinced, he got his DDA to approve the first two units of this "marvellous" Japanese technology to be installed in his district.

Pacific International also invited other individuals and government leaders to the Koki demonstration who were likewise convinced and immediately registered their interest with the company to purchase desalination equipment from them.

Talai says already six units have been bought (by individuals) and up to K20 million in commitments are in the queue awaiting financing.

The company also supplies wind turbines and micro-hydro power systems. Toyota has made a commitment to assist in transporting the water desalination devices anywhere in the country.

Leonard, who incidentally, is also Vice Minister for Environment and Climate Change, may be Pacific International's most prominent sales-

man now.

"I will get the two units installed and have the evidence to demonstrate to other MPs to also purchase desalination equipment for their districts."

Leonard says he is impressed with the technology which is unlike others in operation in the country today.

He says the devices his district purchased are portable and can be relocated when necessary.

Leonard points out that in the relief efforts for earthquake-affected people in the highlands, Western and Gulf, water desalination and purification equipment must be provided also.

The two devices purchased by the Samara-Murua DDA will benefit not only the residents of islands where they will be installed but also sailors who travel the waters of the electorate daily.

Pacific International will ship the equipment to Alotau next week and from there project manager Talai will personally take them to Budibudi and Brooker Islands to have them installed.

And the islanders will once more drink sweet water filtered from the briny waters of the encroaching sea.