



PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

NATIONAL PARLIAMENT OF SOLOMON ISLANDS

COMMITTEE TRANSCRIPT

Ministry of Environment, Conservation & Meteorology

11 March 2008, 3:00pm

Mr Chairman: Welcome and you may proceed with your brief. Thank you.

Mr Chanel Iroi: (PS/Supervising): Thank you, Mr Chairman. Unfortunately, our Permanent Secretary is attending an overseas meeting on behalf of the Ministry and so he is not able to be present.

My name is Chanel Iroi, Director of Meteorology and I am supervising the Ministry whilst our substantive Permanent Secretary is away on overseas duty. I have here our Chief Accountant, Mr Obed Sika who will be assisting me.

Mr Chairman, as far as we know and believe the budget that is allocated to each Ministry has to fall in line with the current government's policies and goals for each division that is being mandated under those ministries.

As you may be aware the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Meteorology is a new ministry that is being established under the current government. Within that Ministry there are three divisions excluding the administration. The main divisions are Environment and Conservation, Meteorology and recently Cabinet has approved the establishment of a new division within the Ministry to deal with climate change.

As we all know climate change is an important area of concern to all of us as Solomon Islands is a least developed country and is very vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. That is the basis of why the government has established this new division. Currently, those are the three main divisions as well as the corporate service that is taken care of by an accountant and the chief admin officer.

The Ministry as mandated has several functions contained in the policies of the government to deal with environment, conservation, national parks and wild life, studies of ecology and also issues of global warming, sea level rise as well as other issues to do with meteorology. Those are the different functions mandated under the Ministry and those divisions I mentioned to carry out all these functions.

The expected outcomes the Ministry is anticipating within the political lifetime of the current government are:

- (i) that people to be aware of their potential contribution to environmental damage and take actions to assist environmentalists and authorities to protect the environment

- (ii) that all laws and regulations designed to protect the environment are upheld and applied by the relevant authorities
- (iii) that there should be corporate arrangement in place with groups that involve in extractive industries to ensure eco-systems are protected. That means all stakeholders have to be involved within the government, NGOs and also the private sector.

Also the indigenous flora and fauna are to be protected by legislation. And as far as we know those legislations, some of them are yet to be implemented. Those are some of the expected outcomes that will come within the Environment Division.

Also regional bodies such as the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional and Environment Programs (SPREP) to take seriously and assist and also seek funding for the country in terms of adaptation to climate change.

Also that we uphold the commitments that we have under international conventions, including the Convention on Bio-diversity, Climate Change as well as the Kyoto Protocol so that we look at assisting each other to minimize the effects of global warming and climate change.

There should be an adaptation plan on climate change to address all issues related to climate change, which will certainly affect all of us or those of us who are very vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

Mr Chairman, that is the brief I want to make regarding our Ministry. I believe the budget that is before us will certainly reflect all the issues, functions, and responsibilities that this Ministry is committed to do. We believe the budget regarding the expenses and also manpower will be adequate in order to carry out the responsibilities and functions mandated for all of us under this new Ministry. Thank you, Mr Chairman.

Mr Chairman: In the establishment according to the 2008 proposed Recurrent Establishment and Manpower Budgeting there is a total of 32 vacancies for the department out of the 98 established posts in the Ministry. What are your plans of these vacancies and how long will it take you to fill these vacancies, and whether this is reflected in your recurrent?

Mr Iroi: As I've mentioned in my introductory remarks, this is a new Ministry and we believe that the manpower we have including the filled and the vacant positions are adequate to carry out the functions within this new Ministry. Since it is a technical ministry we believe we can fill these vacancies to assist the ministry carry out its functions and responsibilities.

Mr Chairman: What is the time line in terms of filling the posts? The Public Service has given the responsibility of recruitment to all departments. There is a temporary freeze now, but what kind of timing are you looking at filling your vacancies.

Mr Iroi: We believe, as I mentioned, as soon as we get the mandate we can negotiate and consult the Public Service Division to advertise all vacant posts so as to recruit the required manpower to fill up those posts.

Hon Sogavare: Are you happy with the budget allocation?

Mr Iroi: Thank you for your question. We have consulted our other colleagues regarding the budget. Overall we are happy with the budget, however, there are some discrepancies that we need to highlight for the information of the Committee and our colleagues from the Ministry of Finance to look at whether there is possibility to make changes to the budget of the Ministry.

If you allow me I want to make those highlights for you. If you look at the expenditures for headquarters and administration, line item 299-0001-3100 - House Rent. The figure that is estimated for 2008 is \$290,902 for house rentals for staff of this Ministry.

Mr Chairman, the information we have at hand for the current staff that have already been waived by the Public Service Division to be under the Government open market rentals, the figure that we have here for this year is \$615,600.

If you compare that current figure and compare it to the allocated figure for the budget, the budget figure is about 50% less than the already waived allocated rentals for the staff of this ministry. We want to highlight here that the figure we have is about two times the current figure allocated in the budget. We want to highlight here whether the committee can consider amending that figure to the figure currently for the waived rentals.

If you go to the other page under Environment, Conservation, line item 299-0273-3100 on house rent for the amount of \$12,000. We want this line item to be moved and incorporated into the line item on house rent under headquarter and administration because we believe house rentals is administered under headquarters and not individual divisions. That is the first point I want to make.

The second point is to look at the salaries of staff of Environment and Conservation Division on line item 299-0273-1010 to 1015. Mr Chairman, you will note that the allocation for 2008 is \$74,713. We believe that this will only cater for one staff of the Division.

For your information, the approved establishment for the Environment and Conservation Division has 13 posts where 10 posts have already been filled and we are looking at filling three (3) more posts within that division. The salaries of filled posts totaled \$383,967 and for vacant posts \$122,932.

Mr Chairman, if you look at the figures and compare that to the allocated figure there is a large difference there. Whether there is an omission, that is what I want to know, but there is a big difference in the allocated figure and the figure that we have for the staff in the division.

The Environment Division, as we will all know Mr Chairman, is very important to the lives of our people and the economic development of the country. In order for people to be aware of the different aspects of the environment and how it affects people's lives, they need to know the functions of the Ministry and also the different types of environmental effects.

This brings me to the area of publicity and promotion. The policies of the government and also the corporate plan that our Ministry has been mandated and has already published, publicity and promotion is one of the very important functions the Division needs to carry out. However, that area of concern is not being reflected in the budget. Therefore, we would like to encourage the committee to see if there is a

possibility of putting forward to the budget again the line item to cater for publicity and promotion because we all know our people in the rural areas need to know issues affecting them regarding the environment.

We go now to the Meteorology Division Mr Chairman. If we look at the civil service salaries of the Meteorology Division, the allocation for 2008 is \$879,273. If we look at the establishment, the filled positions within the Meteorology Division amount to about \$1.3million for salaries of filled positions. About \$1,300,909 is for the already filled positions within the Meteorology Division.

As you are aware, we also have some vacancies that we need to fill especially for this important technical division and the vacant positions amount to \$343,597. If you compare the amount allocated for the filled position to the amount allocated under the budget, you will see a difference of about \$421,646. That is less than the amount we allocated. If you divide that to the amount a Level 5 staff will receive it means that we have to make redundant 21 of our staff within the Meteorology Division. I believe that will not happen because the Meteorology Division also plays an important role for our people. That is for the established staff within the Meteorology Division.

If we go to the non-established overtime allowance, as I am aware under the General Orders the non-established staff are entitled to receive overtime, and most of our staff are drivers who work 24 hrs around the clock. You will find that overtime allowance for non-established staff under Meteorology is zero. That is another discrepancy I want to point out in this allocation.

Mr Chairman, those are some of our concerns we want to raise about the budget. Thank you.

Mr Chairman: Do you also want to brief us on your development expenditures?

Mr Iroi: Yes, I was given a copy just before I came in here by a colleague from the Ministry of Planning but I believe they will assist us. Yes, we have a copy in here for the Development Budget

Mr Chairman: For head 499.

Mr Iroi: Mr Chairman, when we see allocations in the Development Budget for our Ministry, we are very happy and glad. As you might be aware, I think this is the first time in many years that the government has been able to help us.

Let me just explain the projects that we intend to proceed with. The first one is the renovation of the Meteorology Office at Henderson. Currently our offices at Henderson include other MET stations around the country are in bad state. Therefore, we see that in order to enhance the morale of our staff in the work they are doing, there is need to improve our infrastructures as well so that they can perform the work expected of the government and also for our people. This project here will cater for renovation of our offices and our staff quarters around the country.

The second development project is on Buala and Tingoa Meteorological station. As you know Mr Chairman, the two provinces, except Central Province, that have no meteorological stations are Isabel and Renbel. Renbel is very strategic in terms of cyclone monitoring because it places itself in the genesis area of cyclones as well as the movement and path of cyclones.

We have been discussing the importance of having a station in Renbel so that it assists us to help them and also to monitor the movement of cyclones, and that is why we see it as very important to establish a station at Tingoa for our people in Rennell and Bellona Province. Buala is also important for aviation and other economic activities. That area of work depends on weather and also climate information.

On the relocation of Lata Meteorological station, currently the house that we have been using is owned by Post Office and because of some business aspects we have been moved again, so currently we are located in a temporary room within the Provincial Government in Temotu.

Our enclosure of Meteorology station has been relocated again and currently is not in a favorable condition to carry out meteorological observations and that is why we want to move the office right next the domestic terminal at Lata. This will cater for the relocation of the MET station and also the enclosure at Temotu.

The last one is on environment impact Year A assessment within the Environment Division. This is associated with the mining aspects, different types of mining - prospecting as well as the Gold Ridge mining. This will cater for Year A assessment within the development of the mining industry in the country.

Mr Chairman: On the other part you have \$7.4million for the not consolidated, on the other page. What are these?

Mr Iroi: For those three GEF funded projects, two of them mandated under the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Meteorology are the National Adaptation Plan of Action (NAPA) and National Communications to the UNFC.

The National Adaptation Plan of Action is currently ongoing. We are expected to complete this project by July or August this year because we want to have it finished before the GEF Council in November.

Because in order to get the adaptation climate change project, the prerequisite is to complete this document and NAPA. We want to complete it round about the middle of this year so that the project proposals contained in this document will be translated into.....,which is required by the GEF Secretariat so that it will be considered at the GEF Council in November.

For your information, Mr Chairman, the GEF has already allocated towards the adaptation project to climate change USD\$3million. This is ready for us to access under the climate change adaptation. Our prerequisite is to complete the document and once it is completed we can then submit projects to access the USD\$3million. It has already been allocated for Solomon Islands under the framework and also because Solomon Islands is a least developed country.

Mr Chairman: What does that really involve, and the benefits?

Mr Iroi: The National Adaptation Plan of Action (NAPA) is a program mandated by the Convention to deal with vulnerable countries, and since Solomon Islands is one of the LDCs, this program is only for LDCs to access. In the Convention, a fund was created called the LDC Fund to cater for projects that will come under the NAPA.

NAPA is a project, which at the end we have to complete a document which must contain the sector and also the location within a country that we see and think

needs urgent attention in regards to adaptation climate change. For example, if we want to look at may be Ontong Java, and because of the information we gathered along the way that Ontong Java is one of the vulnerable areas to climate change because of the rising sea level and increased erosion to its coastal zones, it could be a location and one of the project sites that can be included as a proposal to be put into a number document. The number document will be facilitated and submitted to the climate change secretariat, and that is where donors can access it. As soon as it reaches the climate change secretariat, the donors will go to the site and access the information to see which projects they can fund.

Under the LDC fund, we have already been allocated USD3million. This is for Solomon Islands allocation. If we submitted 10 projects but the \$3million only caters for two or three projects then the rest of the projects can be funded bilaterally or multilaterally. Such information will be used by donors to get information to do the funding for a country. That is for NAPA.

The second national communications is an obligation of the country. We have already submitted the first national communications. The second national communications is an enabling activity funded by the GEF.

The current allocation for this project is USD\$420,000, for which \$15,000 has already been used to do the stock take exercise on the proposal for GEF's consideration and acceptance of the proposal. Therefore, only \$405,000 is left for the second national communications.

We are now at the preparatory stage to start this project and it will be a three year project and is part of the obligations of the country.

The national communication basically gathers information regarding what the country is doing in terms of climate change, in terms of what sort of activities the country is doing to mitigate the green house gas emissions, what sort of activities are people doing to adapt to the effects of climate change. It is like a country situation information that is being passed through the climate change secretariat and also the parties to the convention to know what is happening in the country. That is a brief to those two projects.

Mr Chairman: Any comment from Members?

Hon Sogavare: Mr Chairman, protection of the environment is a very important product for the country, and that underpins the importance of this Ministry. From what we heard from the supervising Permanent Secretary on the allocations of the budget on personal emoluments, they will be more consultations between you and the Budget Unit, may be through your Ministers. Even budget for people at post is very serious. You have vacancies there but we also heard that there are no allocations for people even at post, and so that is quite serious.

We heard that this Ministry is a very important part of the government structure in terms of what it wants to deliver, but it does not reflect in the way the budgetary allocation is given to the Ministry. That needs to be taken note of.

The vacancies are 32, and are you going to give them? This also goes with finance because not only are people at post but also budgetary allocations and so these two issues need to be addressed. People need to come from you and budgetary allocations from the Ministry of Finance.

This is the second day we are looking at this budget, and if this is what will be reflected throughout the ministries, then we are really talking about a budget that is under funded.

May be we need to have some enlightenment from the Ministry of Finance.

Mr Bob Quiggin (*Budget Advisor*): Without actual directions to point out from last year's actuals, this Ministry has received a 60% increase in salaries and a 700% increase in other charges. I think if any other ministry they would be jumping up and down. They have new duties and new jobs, and we recognize that. We also recognize that being able to get staff onboard, and especially qualified staff is not always an easy process.

In regards to some of the issues that are raised, I think we will find that the Ministry has so many things to do that it is going to have a difficult time meeting many of its obligations, and as a result it will probably have some spare people that can move around. So having moved from just short of \$700,000 in other charges to just short of \$5,700,000 in charges, I think they might be able to find a house renting less than \$300,000. I think the significant increase probably has demonstrated thethat has been placed on this department.

Hon Sogavare: Mr Chairman, are you saying that other allocations are over allocated than others or other items are under funded.

Mr Quiggin: That is quite possible. This is a fairly unique situation where the Ministry was created quite recently. We became aware of the Climate Change Division just last week. And the fact that we managed to get it into the budget, has not been an easy work by my colleagues at the Budget Unit. The fact we would not be surprised if there are some reallocations within the Ministry. But it is a completely new ministry.

Hon Sogavare: Mr Chairman, like I said this is probably one too like all the other ministries, then we need to get a summary of ministries' administration on any under allocation. Other ministries that have come before did mention the same thing.

This is the seventh ministry and we are hearing sort of the same thing but of course we appreciate the explanation by the Budget Unit that they can shift funds around on items. You can actually do that under the budgetary process allowed under the system.

But on the face of it, there seems to be very important areas that are under funded. I am not sure the kind of consultations that are done between ministries, politicians, and the Budget Unit appears clearly that they come before us complaining that something is not given to them. This clearly shows there is no consensus on where to cut this imposed decisions of Cabinet or something without fully appreciating that there are people on the ground doing the work or the function is there and under funded. But that is the kind of impression we are getting here. The kind of level and the kind of consultations that is carried out between the relevant authorities that actually came up with this draft.

Hon Soalaoi: We would very much want to give you the shortfalls, unfortunately this committee is not mandated to change figures. We really share what you are saying.

The question I want to ask is that this economy relies heavily on forestry - the logging industry. Of all these plans here, is there any plan to look at how we can tackle the logging industry without affecting the revenues we are getting from it?

Mr Chairman: Raising the concerns and issue of environment, degradation.

Mr Iroi: We all know that the country depends very much on our forestry for its revenue. The issue of environmental damage that is being done by forestry is something that our Ministry and the Ministry of Forestry are consulting each other on to look at areas on how we can help each other in trying to decrease the amount of damage being done to the environment because of forestry logging.

It is a matter of consultation between the Ministry, other stakeholders and our resource owners to see how best we can help each other to sustainably use our forests to assist the country and also assist resource owners to try and minimize the amount of damage done to our environment because certainly the damage will have after effects in other areas of the ecosystem.

It is something the Ministry needs to look at. There must be close collaboration and consultation with all stakeholders, resource owners and as well as other players within this important area. This is something the Ministry will very much look at in consultation with the Ministry of Forestry. Thank you.

Hon Soalaoi: I asked that question because some of these international organizations that we are a member of, and may be others that will join later on are actually anti-logging. The Ministry somehow is placed in an awkward position to push its objectives through when you have a government that needs revenue coming from the logging industry. I just want to mention that.

The other area I also want to question is that there is an Environmental Department in the Ministry of Health. I am just interested in the word '*environment*'. My apologies if I am asking a question outside of your purview.

There is an Environment Department in the Ministry of Health and also the City Council. That issue that was of concern, and I hope it still is a concern is solid waste management. And as you are aware most of the sewage systems especially from the city going directly to the rivers and seas. That contributes very much to the environmental degradation, and is a health hazard.

According to tests we did last year from as far as Kakabona Sea, the sea water there is very high in toxic. I guess the Director is aware of this.

What part is the Ministry playing ensuring there is a proper and solid waste management plan whether it is going to be placed under the City Council or the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of Environment? I am just interested to know what your inputs are going to be if there is such a plan.

Mr Iroi: Your question comes at the right time honorable Member.

The situation in previous years is that the Environment Division has only two staff, and so you would not expect these two staff to do most of the work expected within the Ministry.

Recently, the Ministry has been able to recruit to increase its number, and currently it has 10 staff members, most of whom are tertiary graduates. We are still

looking for, as I mentioned earlier on, three more staff to be able to do the activities mandated in this Division. Now there is 10 staff within the Environment Division.

In regards to the waste management strategic plans, currently there is a workshop being held at the Quality Inn on waste management. Previously there has been no national waste management strategy in place.

The Government has, since its inception early this year, taken a multi approach step when we did our consultations on the corporate plan by involving all stakeholders. So it is not only the Ministry that did the corporate plan but the NGOs were also invited as well also the Civil Society to do two weeks consultation within the Ministry to produce this plan. This corporate plan within the Ministry is a result of all stakeholders putting their heads together to produce this plan.

On waste management strategy, there is a workshop which started on Monday and will end on Friday which expected to produce a draft waste management strategic plan. This plan will be distributed to other stakeholders for their final comments before a final plan is in place.

Once a waste management strategic plan is in place we can then access funding from GEF that are expected to come under this strategy, but the prerequisite is to have a strategic plan in place. The workshop that is now currently being held at the Quality Inn is going to do that for the country.

Mr Chairman: I am satisfied unless Members have further questions and comments, do you have any final concluding comments and remarks?

Mr Iroi: Thank you, Mr Chairman, just to re-emphasize our salaries again. I am worried about our staff as there are no funds to pay for their salaries. I want our friends from the Ministry to reconsider and make sure that the right amount for the salaries of our staff is taken care of. Otherwise many of our staff, which we recently recruited, will be back on the streets again, and that is not the best thing to happen.

Mr Chairman, with regards to the vacant posts, a lot of them fall under the Meteorological Division, and as you are aware we have taken steps to increase our services because of development in the Aviation industry meaning most of our staff are going to be trained in aviation forecasting. And because of that we are going to have a lot of vacancies. We want to do that so that we can provide services to our people. We need to recruit people to be trained in these specialized areas.

Also, Mr Chairman, you will be aware because of the April 2nd disaster last year, the tsunami (*end part not available*)