Koror, Thursday, July 22, 2010: “I’m not an expert, but I know that without water no one can survive. Even when scientists look for life on Mars the first thing they look for is water.” With these words Palau’s President, His Excellency Johnson Toribiong, opened a regional meeting on water management currently being held in Palau. He reminded delegates from 13 Pacific island countries that water is one resource that no one can take for granted.

“The availability of freshwater is important to the quality of life, and I will go further, it is critical to the economic development of every country,” Mr Toribiong said. “So I urge all of you to take this conference as a serious collective effort by all of us in the Pacific region to address these important challenges.”

“The theme ‘Implementing Sustainable Water Resources and Wastewater Management’ accurately describes the challenges facing our nation and I believe all other Pacific Island Nations,” he said.

President Toribiong noted that the meeting was very timely for Palau as only a few months previously the nation had suffered a severe water shortage and water hours were put in place to limit use.

The already fragile water resources found on most Pacific islands, due to their small size and lack of natural storage, are coming under increased pressure from competing land use, vulnerability to natural hazards and increased climate variability and change. In many Pacific countries, even small variations in water supply can have a significant impact on health, quality of life and economic development.

The region's access to improved drinking water and sanitation lags behind the rest of the world. About 46% of Pacific populations have access to improved drinking water compared to the global average of 87%. Similarly only 48% of Pacific populations have access improved sanitation compared to 62% globally.

The meeting's participants are involved in two projects, based out of the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC), that are trying to improve this situation. They include 14 Global Environment Facility (GEF) funded demonstration projects in 13 Pacific island countries that aim to show the benefits of an integrated approach to water management through tangible on the ground activities and a European Union (EU) funded integrated water resources management (IWRM) project that seeks to provide the governance and regulatory support for this type of approach.

Marc Wilson, Regional Manager of the GEF IWRM project, said that it was appropriate that the meeting was being held in Koror where water availability and wastewater management is an acknowledged constraint to development.

"Water performs vital services from ridge to reef and is everybody's business from communities to cabinet," Mr Wilson said. "It is a measure of the seriousness and awareness of water issues in Palau that His Excellency, President Toribiong, has agreed to open this meeting."

Jose Padillo, Regional Technical Advisor for Marine, Coastal and Island Ecosystems with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), said the relevance of these projects cannot be overemphasised given the situation the Pacific finds itself in.

"Oceania taken collectively has been off-track with respect to the water and sanitation targets," Mr Padillo said. "In fact, the percentage of the region's population with access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities has declined by 1% and 2% respectively. Thus we see the

importance of this project in meeting the water and sanitation targets."

Tiare Holm, Vice Chairperson of Palau's Environmental Quality Protection Board (EQPB) said that the meeting was a great opportunity for countries to share information and learn from one another. She reminded delegates that change was slow and needed the dedication and commitment of many people.

"As a Palauan who has spent years in the field of natural resource management and conservation, I can say that management and prevention is always especially challenging, as the outcomes are rarely immediate," Ms Holm said. "Persistence and dedication is required from our government, our partners and our communities."

The GEF projects focus on four key areas: watershed management, wastewater management and sanitation, water resources assessment and protection, and water efficiency and safety.

In Palau the GEF project is looking at ways to better manage and protect the Ngerikiil watershed, which supplies 80% of all of Palau's water.

For more information on the GEF IWRM projects go to: www.pacific-iwrm.org

For more information on the EU IWRM project go to: www.pacificwater.org

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