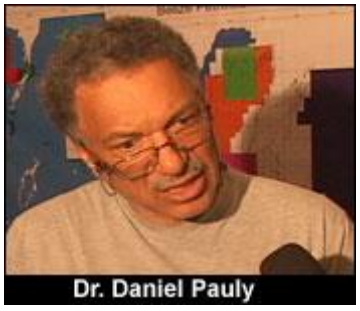
Experts Discuss Belize Marine Biodiversity

June 29, 2011

Some of the World's top marine scientists are meeting in Belize City this week to review the status of the country's marine biodiversity and the potential impacts that oil exploration and drilling could have on the local marine ecology. The University of British Columbia's Fisheries center and its "Sea Around Us Project," in partnership with Oceana Belize, are hosting the two-day Marine Conference today and tomorrow, at the Biltmore Hotel. Jim McFadzean was at the opening this morning and has this report.

Jim McFadzean of 7Newsbelize.com Reporting:

Oceana along with its international partners keep upping the ante in its efforts at keeping oil drills at bay from Belize's pristine coastal waters. And so it's no surprise that at this two day marine conference, intending to share the important works of both local and international scientists and researchers on the country's marine assets, that one of the major concerns being discussed, is how an oil spill would affect the region's rich biodiversity.

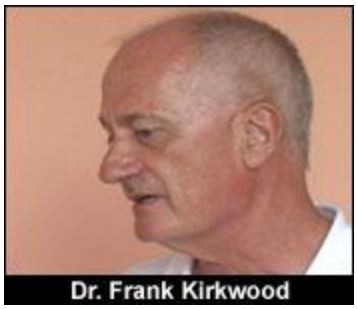

Dr. Daniel Pauly

Dr. Daniel Pauly - Principal Investigator, Sea Around Us Project
"This marine biodiversity, from which Belize derives considerable benefits in the form of tourism and fisheries, is at risk, but really, people should know that before they decide to encourage an industry that is risky, and that will not bring so many jobs as people think."

The government is yet to be swayed by this type of international pressure. However, even some of the experts attending this conference today, agree, there are significant benefits to be derived from oil drilling, as long as that drilling doesn't happen not offshore.

Dr. Frank Kirkwood, a Petroleum Engineer and Economics Consultant, is a former BP employee. He says Belize's economy could double in the next ten years based solely on onshore drilling. In the case of offshore drilling, the benefits could be considerably more, except with one caveat, it will come at a high price.

Dr. Frank Kirkwood, Petroleum Engineer and Economics Consultant



"In my view, onshore drilling can go ahead in sort of normal areas, but in places that are especially of value to you for the environmental impact onshore, then actually, its best not to drill in those places because of the risk being that you damage those areas, and they are very special to you."

Jim McFadzean

"You would say, and continue to agree that offshore drilling should be a no? Well, any type of offshore drilling"

Dr. Frank Kirkwood

"Well, as I said in my presentation, in Belize - I'm talking about the situation in Belize now, not the situation worldwide - but in Belize, a lot of your economy, and a lot of the jobs, and a lot of everybody's livelihood depends currently on your marine environment. And therefore, it's very special - perhaps it's the most special marine environment that I've ever sort of been in a country. And I think, to do off-shore drilling, and to take significant risks today with that marine environment, is not worth it for the long-term price."

Despite the cold shoulder treatment it's been getting from both the government and those in the oil industry, Oceana says it is pressing on with its educational campaign, maintaining its opposition to offshore drilling.

Audrey Matura - Shepherd - VP, Oceana

"We find that we have many areas we can persuade the Government that off-shore oil drilling should not be done, because it is a danger to our marine resources. But I think that one of the most compelling areas can be the scientific area, where these scientists, as you've heard some of them - and you can talk with some of them - they will tell you the facts as it is."

The conference ends tomorrow, and on Friday the group of international scientists will be taken on a trip to the Turneffe Island.

The Sea Around Us project was created to document large-scale impacts on marine ecosystems of the world, and to find solutions to the challenges they pose.

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