

Barrel tax revamp gains support

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Most residents surveyed back the use of revenue to promote food security and energy projects

By Alan Yonan Jr.



There is solid public support for revamping the state's tax on oil imports so that more of the revenue is used to support energy and food security as originally envisioned, according to a survey released Friday by the polling firm OmniTrak Group Inc.

Of those surveyed, 78 percent said they "agreed" that the \$1.05-per-barrel tax should be restored to what had been proposed before state lawmakers in 2010 voted to divert the lion's share of the funds to help balance the state budget.

"Hawaii residents clearly support the return of the 'barrel tax,'" according to the survey, published in a semiannual OmniTrak report called "The People's Pulse."

The results were based on an OmniTrak cellphone and landline telephone poll of 700 adults statewide conducted between Dec. 3 and 17. The margin of error was plus or minus 3.7 percentage points.

Revenue from the barrel tax originally was to be divided among the state Energy Office, the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health. In addition to promoting renewable energy projects and locally grown food, the tax also was intended to provide funding to address environmental impacts like oil spills.

However, lawmakers amended the bill so that 60 percent of the revenue would go toward balancing the state budget.

The OmniTrak survey echoed the results of similar polls conducted recently by the Blue Planet Foundation, a local group dedicated to reducing Hawaii's dependence on oil.

Gov. Neil Abercrombie on Tuesday will outline his administration's proposal for redistributing revenue from the barrel tax, said Mark Glick, administrator of the state's Energy Office.

Glick said he was "very encouraged" by the results of the OmniTrak survey.

"A clean energy agenda is strongly supported by the public. Hopefully this answers the question on where the public stands on energy security. And we see that translating through to the Hawaii Clean Energy Initiative," Glick said.

The HCEI calls for the state to satisfy 40 percent of its energy needs with renewable sources and reduce energy use 30 percent by 2030.

"For us it is a pretty clear guidance from the public as to how they value this issue and how they see the state's resources are dedicated as to where they should go," Glick said.

The People's Pulse also polled residents about the health of Hawaii's economy, consumer confidence and their views of the state's visitor industry.

While the economy was still rated the No. 1 issue, it was less of a concern than a year ago. The economy was the most pressing issue for 33 percent of those surveyed in December, down from 52 percent a year earlier.

After jumping dramatically in the first half of 2012, the Hawaii Resident Confidence Index eased slightly in December. The index slipped to 107 in December from 109 in May but remained well above its cyclical low of 61 in January 2009.

Those polled also indicated that tourism has a mostly beneficial impact on the state. Asked to rate the industry's impact on the state as a whole, 86 percent said the impact is "positive," including 40 percent who said it is "very positive."