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Rongelap's dream becomes reality

By CHRISTIAN LIEDTKE

Rongelap's independent scientist Bernd Franke is convinced that Rongelap Island is ready for resettlement as soon as the rest of the island is fertilized with potassium.

"The Rongelap people can go back to their island if they want," the scientific director of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research in Heidelberg, Germany, told the Journal, as well as to the Rongelap people in the recent community meetings.

The Rongelap community was informed about the new state of art of the possibilities for the resettlement of Rongelap Island, because new scientific findings of both the US Department of Energy (DOE) and independent scientific experts agree that Rongelap Island can be safely reinhabited.

Franke is one of the independent scientific experts who was hired to check DOE's data. Historically, Rongelap people have had a high degree of mistrust because of being wrongly informed by the US government in the past. Franke has a good reputation and a high credibility in the Rongelap community because he served in the independent scientific team in 1988 that did research on Rongelap contamination. Proving the DOE's analysis wrong at that time led to the \$45 million trust fund that the US Congress established in 1996 for the necessary clean up prior to resettlement.

According to Franke's actual recommendation concerning the resettlement there is one last thing to do before Rongelap people can go back: The second half of Rongelap Island should be fertilized with potassium which would probably cost between \$100,000 and \$200,000. "So the people don't have to ask: 'Where did you pick up your coconut today?'" Franke illustrates.

The potassium fertilizer put on the ground is absorbed by the local plants instead of the dangerous radioactive cesium from the fallout, Franke explains. This measure reduces the amount in cesium in plants to about one tenth. Resettlement could take place theoretically

very soon — as quickly as one year after the potassium fertilization, he said. Additionally, the topsoil has been removed and refilled by crushed coral sand, which greatly reduced the external radiation.

After all these measures the average radiation dose for the worst case that people would eat local food only is 11 milirem (mrem) per year, and thus it is below the 15 mrem limit adopted by the Nuclear Claims Tribunal in 1998 as the cleanup goal. According to the data Franke made, this case is very unlikely because the diet of Marshallese people consists mainly of imported food like rice. A survey on Mejjatto showed that the inhabitants' diet contains just 18 percent of local food. A mixed food diet like this transferred to Rongelap would mean that the radiation dose is likely to be between four and eight mrem per year. However, the high-end radiation dose for the unlikely nutrition with local food only can rise up to 22 mrem per year. But Franke explains: "You can live there without any problems and nourish yourself in a way that you don't go above 15 mrem per year."

Fundamentally, a 15 mrem per year radiation dose is just a small portion of the amount of radiation that any person in the world receives from natural sources. According to Franke's explanation, this dose is about one-tenth of the radiation every human receives anywhere. Actually, the total radiation on Rongelap Island after the cleanup is even lower than the natural radiation at most places in the world. So the risk for the health of people who are exposed to the additional Rongelap's radiation is extremely small, Franke said. "The risk to die of cancer because of a 15 mrem dose a year is comparable to the risk of dying in your car when you drive four miles a week, or the risk of dying when you smoke two cigarettes a week," Franke points out.

An argument against the resettlement could be that just Rongelap Island is cleaned up and that all the other islands in the atoll are still contaminated. Therefore they can't be used for growing local food or for other utilization.

Additionally the people who decide to go back will also be monitored regularly for a final safeguard. This whole-body counting will provide a high assurance that the true radiation exposure is known to each individual and that the annual radiation dose will not rise above 15 mrem, Franke explains.

But despite his own optimism and his promising data, Franke stays modest and realistic concerning the eventual resettlement of Rongelap Island. "My work and my findings are only a part of the story. Personal, political and psychological factors play the major role to come to a decision," Franke says.

Rongelap Major James Matayoshi goes in the same direction by saying: "The resettlement is not only a matter of science, it is mainly a matter of trust and personal decisions." Further on he explains the role of the Rongelap local government: "We will not put any pressure on Rongelap people to resettle. It is their individual choice."

Instead Matayoshi sees the government task of informing people to enable them to make the right decisions and in providing best circumstances for going back by creating jobs, building up the island's infrastructure and homes for the people. For this reason the Rongelap government is promoting tourist, black pearl and reef-fish farming projects. The mood of the people at the community meeting has been dominated by mixed feelings, because there have been many years of uncertain information and distrust, Matayoshi reports. "But now we are at a crossroad of the relationship with the

Department of Energy, we are coming to a state of trust,” Matayoshi says of the actual atmosphere.

Some people are on going back and especially for old people, going back is an urgent issue, Matayoshi says, because considering their near death, they want to end their life at the place where they were born. According to Matayoshi’s information, already half of the radiation-exposed generation, originally born on Rongelap, died in exile. “And for the new generation the resettlement will be much harder because often they are attached to other places. We can’t wait so long anymore,” Matayoshi tells the Journal. “We really don’t want the community to scatter in the wind and disappear forever.”

Another reason to get the resettlement started soon concerns the limited resources of the fund, which are at the Rongelap government’s disposal. “Now and in the next five years we have the opportunity to resettle. But if we start in 20 years, it will have passed. It is a now or never situation,” Matayoshi adds. Altogether up to 4,000 people are potential home-comers to Rongelap, but not all of them will go back and it will be more like a slow backflow. “We are speaking about a 10 to 20 year period; perhaps next year 50 or 100 people will go back,” Matayoshi notes.

For the people of Rongelap going home does not just mean to rebuild their traditional way of life, “it means to regain our identity, to get control over our destiny again and finally to become free again,” Matayoshi ends.

Finally the possible resettlement will not affect the outstanding compensation claims to the Tribunal, which will be filed into US courts in December this year. According to Matayoshi, there are three outstanding compensation claims that will be filed. The first claim is for about \$212 million of compensation for a total cleanup of Rongelap Atoll, the second claim is about \$80 million for compensation for the hardship of living in exile, and the third claim is for resolving the loss of use of Rongelap caused by the contamination, which has not been valued yet.

‘The island is safe for resettlement’

Rongelap Atoll Local Government (RALGov) officials held community meetings earlier this month on three islands where the Rongelap people live to review findings and recommendations of both the US Department of Energy (DOE) and independent scientific experts retained by Rongelap about radiological clean up and resettlement projects at Rongelap Island.

The US delegation hosted by Rongelap Mayor James Matayoshi included Nik Pula, director of the Office of Insular Affairs, DOE Marshall Islands programs coordinator William Jackson, and DOE scientist Dr. Terry Hamilton. The Rongelap delegation included Matayoshi, the Rongelap Council, alab (clan heads), and Senator Abacca Anjain-Maddison. Officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs attended the meeting in Majuro.

By invitation of Matayoshi, Bernd Franke of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research in Heidelberg, Germany made a presentation at each meeting. Franke served on the independent Rongelap Scientific Management Team formed to study contamination at Rongelap after the community evacuated the island in 1985.

The Scientific Management Team recommended in 1994 that radiological clean up be undertaken at Rongelap prior to resettlement. The US National Academy of Sciences and DOE agreed with the SMT findings and recommendations, and on that basis Rongelap proposed a resettlement program that was accepted by Congress and Interior Department. In connection with the clean up conducted at Rongelap and on-going radiation level measurements, Dr. Hans Behling and Dr. John Mauro served as independent investigative scientists, reviewing data and DOE studies of radiation at Rongelap.

In 2004, Behling and Mauro wrote to Rongelap leaders and the community, stating that “Rongelap Island today is a safe place to live for all members of the Rongelap community, that includes your children.” DOE experts monitoring clean up and resettlement project workers reached the same conclusion.

To take the safety analysis a step further, Matayoshi decided Franke should be brought back to review the findings of Behling and Mauro. “What we wanted was to have one of the independent scientific investigators from the original studies before clean up evaluate the findings of the independent scientific investigators who have reported on radiation at Rongelap since the clean up,” Matayoshi said. “In other words, we have an independent scientific review of our own independent review.”

Franke reported that the clean up efforts have been effective in bringing radiation levels down, and that as a result “Rongelap Island can be a safe place now.” However, Franke also recommends that radiological remediation efforts continue, including additional potassium treatments, to bring exposure down even further. Matayoshi added: “We have brought Rongelap down to radiation levels well below most other places in the world, but we will keep reducing radiation in every way possible even below safety standards. We want risk of radiation lower than other risks we take in our daily lives.”

Dr. Hamilton’s findings and recommendations agreed with Franke’s in significant respects, Matayoshi said.

“No one is putting any pressure on Rongelap to meet any timetable or take any head count on who goes to visit or live at Rongelap,” Matayoshi said. “That is an individual choice, a choice for families to make. Our job has been to restore Rongelap Island so it has the community facilities and infrastructure to support those who have jobs, have homes, or who visit. Our job is to make sure it is safe and to import food and perform monitoring to make sure it stays safe. That goes for those who are there during construction projects and during actual resettlement.

“The independent scientific experts now tell us safe resettlement is possible. That means the people and their leaders have enough information to make informed choices. That was our primary goal up until now, and we have achieved that goal.”

Matayoshi added that “Now is a time for considering what we have been told, to think about our choices and our future as a community. Senator Jeton Anjain trusted Bernd Franke, and Franke says if we follow our plan, resettlement can be safe. I think it was Senator Anjain’s vision and hope that the community would not scatter in the wind and disappear forever. He wanted us to come together again as a people at Rongelap, when it was safe. What he could not imagine was that we could have a partnership with Interior and Congress to make resettlement a success. These meetings show that Interior, Congress and DOE are ready to support the success of the partnership for resettlement.”

James: ‘We need to resolve the legal claims’

Talking about the political and legal process for both resettlement and further claims, Mayor James Matayoshi says “We can have a partnership with the US and RMI on the resettlement of Rongelap Island, and we hope that will be a success. At the same time, we have a duty as well as a right to seek a determination by the Nuclear Claims Tribunal, and by the US courts, of whether we have any additional legal rights for damages to our lands. RALGov is supporting our landowners in seeking additional compensation. “We need to resolve the legal claims so we can get as much justice as possible, then move on as a community. The US will not walk away from our partnership in the success story of resettlement at Rongelap Island because we go to the Tribunal or the US courts. Even partners sometimes disagree and need the courts to help them resolve differences. That does not take away from the positive partnership we have on resettlement.”