

Member States of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) will meet in Dominica next week to discuss ways in which they can increase their efficiency in managing physical development without harming their countries' natural resources and overall environment.

The two day symposium scheduled for March 4-5th will bring together an estimated 35 persons representing OECS governments departments of environment, physical development, as well as environmental agencies, international and regional funding agencies.

Some of the major issues down for deliberation include an update on the status of the management of Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) in the islands; a review of the laws, regulations, policies and institutions that manage EIAs; and what best practices and safeguards can be developed to better manage the process of impact assessments in order to ensure environmental sustainability in the region.

Over the last 30 years, OECS countries have suffered the loss of significant natural resources and extensive environmental damage as a result of unplanned and improperly advised infrastructural works in the tourism, agriculture and industry sectors.

The Symposium is therefore being held against the backdrop of a need to improve methods used to assess potential environmental impacts on all proposed development. In the past, EIAs have often been placidly applied to infrastructural projects, and associated development contracts, many times without the level of rigour required to ensure minimal damage to critical habitats, coastlines, water quality etc.

The call to address issues and gaps pertinent to EIA management was strongly advocated by the late Saint Lucia Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Physical Development, Ms Marcia Philbert-Jules, and was re-iterated by Ministers of the Environment in their annual meeting held in December 2008.

Officials from the OECS Secretariat envisage that the Symposium will help to focus attention on the gaps, inconsistencies, and non-compliance regarding Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) across the OECS, and will create an atmosphere for a harmonized approach to the management of EIAs across the region can be strengthened.

At the end of the Symposium, the OECS Secretariat hopes to create a framework for the development of a common approach for conducting EIAs which will lead to an improvement in the EIA process in the region and a reduction on the impact of development on the environment.

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