

## Saipan Seeks U.S. Assistance for Geothermal Exploration

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*WorldWide Drilling Resource®*

Saipan is the largest island of the United States' Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), a chain of 15 tropical islands belonging to the Marianas archipelago in the western Pacific Ocean. The island relies entirely on petroleum fuels for energy. Rising oil prices have given the CNMI government a good reason to begin exploring for geothermal resources. The CNMI government hopes the U.S. can assist the island with the funding needed for the project.



Photo of Governor Fitial courtesy of gov.mp

Saipan's Governor Benigno R. Fitial is asking Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, to help the island secure a \$100 million interest-free loan from the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) to investigate the possibility of tapping into Saipan's geothermal potential.

According to Fitial, the contract for the exploration drilling phase has not been awarded yet, but if test drilling reveals no viable geothermal power source on Saipan, the CNMI government won't need to borrow money from the U.S. DOE.

Regardless of the outcome of the drilling program, Fitial hopes Murkowski will visit Saipan later this year. He invited Murkowski to visit the CNMI to discuss renewable energy, federalization, and other issues affecting the CNMI.

Murkowski's father, former Senator Frank Murkowski, served as chair of the Natural Resources Committee. At the time, he was a source of assistance for the CNMI in the U.S. Senate. Since succeeding her father in the U.S. Senate, Senator Lisa Murkowski continues to keep an eye on the islands.

The CNMI received a \$1.2 million grant from the Department of the Interior to conduct a geothermal investigation. Test boreholes will be drilled roughly 2000 feet\* near the city of Gualo Rai, to determine if underground temperatures are hot enough for a potential binary geothermal power plant. Once the drilling contract is awarded, it could take several months to determine whether there is a viable geothermal energy source

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for the island's electricity needs.

The CUC (Commonwealth Utilities Corporation) believes Saipan's proximity to the active Mariana volcanic arc, extensional faulting, and shallow water wells with abnormal temperatures in the area suggest a good geothermal resource may exist beneath Saipan.

If test drilling indicates a good geothermal resource, the CUC will invite companies to bid on the actual development and commissioning of the power plant. If the results are negative, the CUC will investigate other renewable energy sources such as gasification, solar, or wind.

\*(1 foot ≈ .304 meters)

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