By ALDETH LEWIN
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ST. THOMAS — Global climate change is something the Virgin Islands must address immediately, Nobel prize winner Leonard Nurse told a handful of local policy-makers Friday during a one-day conference on Climate Change at the University of the Virgin Islands.

Nurse was awarded the 2007 Nobel Prize — the same one former Vice President Al Gore received — for his role as a researcher on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, an independent scientific body. The panel was established in 1989 by the World Meteorological Organization and the United Nations Environment Program.

He currently teaches coastal dynamics at the University of the West Indies, is the chairman of the Caribbean Community Climate Change Center in Belize and the director of The Bellairs Research Institute of McGill University, located in Barbados.

According to Nurse, there is no longer any disagreement among scientists about the fact that the world has become warmer and that the global climate system is changing. While the reasons for climate change — either human impact or a natural cycle — may still be debated in the scientific community, it does not change the fact that it is happening and it needs to be addressed immediately.

In his presentation to the conference Friday morning, Nurse detailed statistics showing the impact climate change is already having in the Caribbean region.

"The Caribbean is reflecting pretty much the same patterns of the rest of the world," Nurse said.

Rising sea levels, dying coral reefs and marine life, hotter air temperatures, more intense hurricanes, shorter rainy seasons and warmer waters all have devastating effects on the local environment and the local economy.

Agriculture and tourism are industries in the territory that will be particularly affected, he said.

As the reefs die and beaches are eroded, the draw for tourists will fade. Similarly, hotter temperatures and decreased rainfall can interrupt crop yields and lower Caribbean food production.

Through his research on climate change, he has developed models, or scenarios, using existing and projected information on population growth, energy consumption and other factors. These models are used to calculate what will happen to the climate in the future.

His predictions show that in the next 40 years, average temperatures in the Caribbean will rise by one degree. This may not seem like much, but by the end of the century, temperatures could be as much as five degrees higher on average.

"So the models are telling us something that we don't like," he said.

In the Caribbean, addressing the problems are often costly, but it will be worse if problems are left alone.

"We can't just throw our hands in the air and do nothing," Nurse said.

Deep emission cuts, smart policies and planning and investment in renewable resources are part of the solution, he said.

As a community, Nurse said Virgin Islanders have a responsibility to adopt new technologies to improve water use and efficiency, stop wasting water and electricity, and make changes through proper management of practices and resources. Governments can offer incentives for renewable energy use and create green building codes.

He also is a firm believer in returning to Caribbean culture and history to learn the traditional techniques for dealing with changes in climate.

"I think we ignore too much to our peril the traditional and indigenous technologies," he said.

By combining scientific results with indigenous knowledge, the Caribbean region can survive and prosper in the face of a changing environment.

Ulric Trotz, science adviser at the Caribbean Community Climate Change Center, also spoke to the conference Friday.

Both scientists will meet with Gov. John deJongh Jr. before they leave the territory to share their research and make suggestions for crafting a climate change policy for the Virgin Islands.

The rest of the day was spent in panel discussions and group sessions where participants talked about the challenges the territory faces in addressing climate change and what could be done to move the territory forward.

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