

On My Mind
9/24/10

There are six days yet to go, so maybe it's not too late to ask whether anyone has done the math on the difference in savings between ridding employees and reducing their work hours. Presumably, the government must continue to pay life and health insurance for those whose hours are reduced. If those employees are rified altogether, those payments would cease to be required. Per person, therefore, it would save far more to impose a reduction in force than to reduce work hours.

One question that might be asked is: how many employees would have to lose their jobs to provide the government with the savings that cutting back work hours gives it? That would depend in part, of course, on the salaries of the people let go, but some approximation can surely be made.

Depending on the answer, one might also ask which affects the general economy more: several thousand people with cut incomes, or a few hundred? Those with cuts in work hours will not make as many purchases, may not be able to pay their bills, hurting both the private sector and the Commonwealth Utilities Corporation, the Commonwealth Health Center.... If only a few hundred are unable to do so, the impact would be far less.

What about the few hundred who did lose their jobs? If the principle of Last-In-First-Out is applied - and one assumes that the LIFO were mostly purely political appointees - can one assume that these people were not working before, and somehow survived?

There's far too much guess-work and myth in the way the government is currently making its decisions. The problem is that the needed data probably hasn't even been identified, much less gathered.

By way of contrast: The Record of Decision for the Guam and CNMI Relocation is now out. In the addendum, the very first section is titled "Plan to Transition to Use of Ultra Low Sulfur Fuel on Guam." States the report: "DoN [Department of the Navy] believes that the use of lower sulfur fuels would reduce air emissions and improve public health." Further, the report states, "The group has contacted fuel suppliers...and developed information on the cost differential associated switch to ULSD fuel. Based on the initial data, it has been determined that refineries in Asia would be able to provide ULSD fuel to Guam and the cost differential is within a reasonable range....The stakeholders are focused on a target date of December 2012 for implementation of the ULSD fuel switch and are currently seeking to identify all the factors that must be addressed to make the change....The stakeholders are also in agreement that the move to lower sulfur fuel (500

parts per million [ppm]) as an interim step can be readily achieved before the December 2012 target date and active steps to implement the use of 500 ppm sulfur fuel is [sic] underway. DoN is currently using ULSD fuel in its newer, compliant vehicles and is committed to using ULSD fuel in all its operations and construction activities upon the implementation of the island-wide transition."

On Wednesday of this past week, both local CNMI papers carried the story that Isla Petroleum and Energy Holding Company is introducing ultra low sulfur diesel fuel to the CNMI. A spokesperson for the company said the use of ULSD has been mandated on Guam, and the company, in following that mandate, is also bringing the fuel to the CNMI. It would appear that while the Navy thinks it will take a while to arrange for delivery of ULSD to the area, IP&E, which recently acquired the assets of Shell North Pacific, has already made it a "fait accompli."

The Record of Decision, announced legibly in the *Marianas Variety*, in only microscopic print in the *Saipan Tribune* earlier this past week, is an excellent model of how to make big documents user-friendly. There are break-outs per volume, break-outs per chapter, helpful tabs, and advice on downloading, as well as information on the size of each downloadable segment. The report can be found at < <http://www.guambuildupeis.us> >.

Short takes:

It's almost too confusing to sort out. The front page tells of more payless paydays, and how much it will hurt particularly those with low incomes. The back pages talk of CNMI athletes traveling all over the Pacific. In the meantime, ARRA funds seem to be flooding the coffers, NMC is starting new programs, and with the release of the Record of Decision, there is promise of yet more federal funding for the CNMI. There seems to be money around - it just seems to be going to all the wrong things.

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An editorial in one of the local papers suggested that recovery funds should not be used to rebuild roads, as President Obama has recently proposed, but rather to build high-speed trains, such as the Japanese bullet-trains - a far more efficient way of travel than by car along worn-out highways. In other words, think of tomorrow's needs, not today's. In the CNMI, though slower trains might conceivably be an appropriate mass-transit option, the parallel caution would be that ARRA funds be used to provide more permanent benefits than embellishments to current programs - which seems to be where much of the money is going. The question that needs asking is: when the ARRA money is gone, what will be left to show for it?

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Another case where lack of data may miscolor where money is spent: The

Marianas Visitors Bureau claims that in order to bring in more tourists it needs more funding to provide travel agent incentives. Has this relationship ever been proved - that the more money given to travel agents the more tourists arrive in the CNMI? There are other ways to entice tourists to come visit, but MVA appears to have put all its eggs in one basket and to rely solely on such things as tour agent incentives. Without data to prove the value thereof, such claims are not very persuasive.

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It's too bad it all had to be crowded into one room, but the art show currently at the JoeTen Kiyu Public Library is well worth taking a look at. Also nice are the expanded hours and convenient location! The show is open during regular library hours, and ends October 1st.

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It's encouraging to see the Neighborhood Watch program expanding. Rather than waiting for help from an insolvent government, people are beginning to realize that they have the power to act on their own and are becoming pro-active, finding ways to protect themselves and their homes, cleaning up and otherwise re-vitalizing their villages, without government help. The organization recently incorporated as a non-government organization, which will allow it to apply for grant funding in its own name. Along the same lines are the increase in subscriptions to MINA re-cycling bins, the Rota Women in Action activities - who were reported in a 9/21 *Variety* story as painting a mile-long planter along Rota's main highway. People power - the way to go!

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The *Variety* is asking for reader response to the question: How can the NMI government cut costs? Ideas should be e-mailed to < editor@mvariety.com >. Will anyone reply? Will their suggestions be realistic, do-able? We hope so!

Thought for the week, from an editorial by Anthony Zinn, a retired Marine general, in the 9/17 *Trib*: "Protecting green wealth in the developing world offers far greater potential for peace and prosperity than exploiting mineral resources for three reasons. First, access to the economic benefits that environmental resources provide is far more broadly and democratically shared than that of minerals, which are typically controlled by a single company, government agency or sometimes a foreign country. Second, protecting the environment requires cooperation, participation and openness. It's no surprise that in some of the world's most autocratic countries many of the only openly democratic institutions are local forest council and water boards. And finally, mineral stocks eventually run out, encouraging a "gold rush" mentality that defeats longer term considerations. Green resources, however, can keep on giving - for many generations - if used thoughtfully and shared equitably.

Kudos for the week go to CUC's public service sector. Responses to phone calls about a variety of subjects have, of late, been prompt, pleasant, helpful. A great improvement!

On October 1st, *Trashed*, the next First Friday film at American Memorial Park, examines the causes and effects of what people do with their trash, at 6:30 p.m. The film is 20 minutes long, and will be followed by a discussion, led by the Division of Environmental Quality, on CNMI's waste management. Free environmentally friendly reusable grocery bags will be given to the first 50 families to appear.