

Los Angeles Times

Tongan King Visits Long Beach to Review Desalination Project

His home islands, which have no rivers, now must import all of their drinking water.

By Nancy Wride, Times Staff Writer

The king of Tonga on Monday toured the Long Beach Water Department's ambitious desalination project, which he said might offer an affordable source of drinking water for a tiny island nation that now imports all of it.

Escorted by Secret Service agents, his ministers and family, King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV was driven around the facility, where officials boast of a 20% to 30% faster — thus cheaper — way to desalt seawater than by traditional means. Long Beach engineers have a patent pending on their method that they hope will bring desalination from the margins to a common source of drinking water.

The Polynesian king learned of the project through his daughter, who heard about it from a business acquaintance who sits on the water department's board, said William Clive Edwards, attorney for the princess.

During one of the 85-year-old king's thrice yearly visits for medical checkups at Stanford University's medical center, he requested a demonstration of the pilot program, Edwards said.

The king of the smallest country in the United Nations holds the Guinness record as the world's largest monarch, at 6 feet, 8 inches tall and 462 pounds, but Edwards said he has no major illness. Top medical care is among many services and supplies Tonga lacks.

After the water plant tour was completed Monday, the king posed for photos with the City Council members and local and regional water officials.

Initially, there was to be no conversation with his highness. Controversy last year erupted when amendments were made to the country's constitution to limit press freedom.

So it was perhaps surprising Monday that the king granted two reporters less than five minutes. There was no discussion of politics, only water.

"Our need for water is urgent, yes," the king said quietly. "We have no rivers [to harness for hydropower], so we are interested in how we can use the oceans, and the latest technology, that will use less electricity and be cheaper."

After a luncheon, the Polynesian royalty was to return to the Wilshire District. The king said he would meet today with "business people about industrial development." An aide said the king was especially interested in modern canneries.

The nation he rules is actually 145 islands with a population of about 110,000, most of which is on 75 of the islands.

Edwards said one suggestion posed by Long Beach water officials intrigued the king: installing a desalination tank and system aboard a barge that would float to various islands as needed and pump treated water ashore.

The king, he said, would brief Tongan water officials on the visit after his return home.