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Your Air Conditioning System May Contribute to Skin Cancer



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Written by Shane D. Williams

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Environmentalists from across the Caribbean came to Belize to take part in the Caribbean Ozone Officers Network Meeting which will be taking place from March 2 to March 5. The key topic in the meeting is the implications and requirements of the recent decisions of the Montreal Protocol.

In 1997, Belize signed on to an international agreement called the Montreal Protocol on Substance that Depletes the Ozone Layer. It is an international treaty designed to protect the ozone layer by phasing out the production of a number of substances

believed to be responsible for ozone depletion. It is believed that if the international agreement is adhered to, the ozone layer is expected to recover by 2050. Due to its widespread adoption and implementation, it has been hailed as an example of exceptional international co-operation. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN from 1997 to 2007, says that it is "perhaps the single most successful international agreement to date."

The main enemy of the Ozone Layer is Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and related gases. This gas was mainly used in refrigerants. Belize designed a plan to phase out the use of CFCs in seven to eight years which is in accordance with the Protocol. This was achieved by 2009; however, Belize like much of the rest of the world adapted the use of Hydrochlorofluorocarbon (HCFCs) refrigerants as a replacement product. Studies proved that the HCFC's are as destructive as the CFC's. Therefore, the fight now is to get rid of HCFCs by 2030.

Leonides Sosa of the National Ozone Unit for the Department of the Environment said, "The market has replaced a problem with a problem." He said that approximately 90% of AC systems in Belize use HCFC refrigerants. Most Freon chemical includes HCFC. This is damaging to the Ozone Layer.

The Ozone Layer is way up in the stratosphere. It is a layer which protects life forms against the dangerous ultraviolet radiation that comes from the sun. CFCs and other gases have caused a hole to develop in the Ozone Layer allowing the ultraviolet rays to penetrate the Earth's surface. Ultraviolet rays are very harmful to life. It causes skin cancer, cataracts and weakens the immune system. It also destroys the food source for fishes, plankton.

Belize has received funding from the UN environmental fund because of its commitment to the Montreal Protocol. That commitment was further shown when Belize hosted a three day Trainers Workshop in Hydrocarbon Refrigerants and Technology for technicians in the refrigeration and Air Conditioning Sector of Belize. Hydrocarbons are believed to be the best substitute for HCFCs because they do not cause damages to the Ozone Layer. The workshop was a train the trainer type workshop in which Daniel Colbourne, Hydrocarbon expert from the United Kingdom, trained local technicians on the use, handling and safety of Hydrocarbon refrigerants.

Representatives from 14 Caribbean countries are taking part in the workshop. These countries are Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent, Bahamas, Dominica, Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Lucia, Suriname, Belize and Haiti. The Official from Haiti arrived late because of traveling difficulties. It was a touching moment when he shared information on the present status of his country. He said that over 300,000 have been confirmed dead and he believes the number will reach 500,000. He asked for some tents because 1.4 million people have been left homeless and unsheltered. He said that the experience has left people afraid of concrete buildings.

In an earlier piece I wrote that we need to remember our brothers and sisters from Haiti even after the international media has moved on to the next story. I take this opportunity to encourage everyone to keep supporting the Red Cross's efforts.

