



WORD TO THE WISE
 Ready to buy? Research the product or service first. Then make sure provider has the appropriate license or registration by calling DCCA.

Shedding a Light on Saving Energy

➤ HELPING CONSUMERS OF PV SOLAR REDUCE THEIR ENERGY COSTS EFFECTIVELY

WITH HAWAII'S SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAIC (PV) INSTALLATIONS doubling over the past four years, it seemed as though the PV industry was enjoying a trouble-free boom with no end in sight. It was only within the past year that phrases like "solar saturation," "penetration on the grid" and "Net Energy Metering Agreement" started creeping into the PV lexicon, fueled by reports that consumers

Hawaii ranks third in the nation for cumulative PV installations per capita—four times the national average.

“IF WE CAN HELP BOTH CONSUMERS AND LICENSEES MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS ABOUT PV INSTALLATION, EVERYONE BENEFITS.”

—JO ANN UCHIDA TAKEUCHI, DCCA DEPUTY DIRECTOR

in certain PV-rich communities were having difficulty getting utility company approval of their PV installations. Due to the diversity of its regulatory roles, DCCA found itself uniquely suited to assist in resolving some of these vexing PV issues.

“DCCA, like other government agencies, tends to be somewhat siloed, primarily because each division is focused on its own statutory role and its own jurisdiction,” said Jo Ann Uchida Takeuchi, deputy director of DCCA. “In the case of PV installations, however, several divisions voiced concerns about emerging PV-related issues as well as the need for educational outreach. It was quickly apparent that DCCA could more effectively address the issues through a collaborative, cross-divisional approach rather than in a piecemeal fashion.”

For DCCA, this meant bringing together the Division of Consumer Advocacy (DCA), which receives utility company complaints and protects the interests of utility consumers; the Office of Consumer Protection (OCP) for issues relating to the marketing and advertising

PHOTOS: KRISTIN LIPMAN, BRENT SUYAMA

of PV; the Professional and Vocational Licensing Division (PVL) staff, on behalf of the Contractors License Board, as well as the Regulated Industries Complaints Office (RICO), for issues relating to representations made by the contractor at the time of the PV purchase.

The goal of the collaborative process was to provide a consistent message that would provide guidance to homeowners as well as to regulated industries.

“What we found as we compared notes was that there were steps in the Net Energy Metering approval process that were unclear,” Uchida Takeuchi said. What followed were productive meetings with the Public Utilities Commission and the utility company, and a new DCCA brochure developed about purchasing solar PV systems. DCCA is planning additional targeted outreach initiatives in the near future and continued collaboration with stakeholders.

Uchida Takeuchi is especially pleased that DCCA has an opportunity to look at the PV issues with something other than

the lens of government enforcement.

“Director Lopez has a clear mandate for stronger educational outreach to both consumers as well as licensees. If we can help both consumers and licensees make informed decisions about PV installation, everyone benefits.

“We will of course investigate and, where appropriate, prosecute those who violate advertising or licensing laws,” Uchida Takeuchi said. She expects that DCCA will see more PV-related complaints if marketers engage in high-pressure sales tactics or if PV systems don’t perform as advertised. ■



DCCA Deputy Director Jo Ann Uchida Takeuchi



Hawaii is a leader nationwide in solar heating, with more than 90,000 systems installed statewide.



➤ **TO VERIFY IF A CONTRACTOR, ELECTRICIAN, OR PLUMBER** is licensed, consumers can check on the RICO website at cca.hawaii.gov/rico/business_online or call RICO’s License Business Information Section at (808) 587-4272 (press 2).

‘IS MY CONTRACTOR LICENSED?’

Hiring a licensed professional can make a difference. Here’s why:

➤ **Consumers filed about 250 complaints against unlicensed contractors** with the Regulated Industries Complaints Office, or RICO, said Daria A. Loy-Goto, RICO Complaints and Enforcement Officer.

The complaints covered a range of issues, said Loy-Goto. Poor workmanship. No work being done at all. Contractors with excess material who offer to do a job for cheap.

“Unlicensed contractors may go door-to-door claiming they just ‘finished a job down the street,’” Loy-Goto said. “Consumers may want to see a picture ID so they know exactly who they’re dealing with.”

When hiring a licensed contractor – for painting, drywall or general contracting – he or she must provide proof of liability insurance and training. State laws require a licensed contractor for all work where labor and materials total \$1,000 or more.

As of October 2013, DCCA had licensed more than 12,750 contractors. They are part of the 136,400 professional and vocational licensees registered with DCCA statewide.

