Cruises' environmental effects still a concern

By Kelly Yamashita
ADVERTISER STAFF WRITER

Cruise lines are planning a meeting with Molokai residents as early as this month to discuss the possibility of visits by small groups of cruise passengers to the island.

Holland America Line and Princess Cruises decided earlier this year to cancel all scheduled cruise ship visits to Molokai in response to environmental concerns outlined in a lawsuit filed by the group Earthjustice last year. The suit sought to halt cruise stops to the island.

The cruise ship issue has divided the small community; some Molokai residents oppose port stops because of their environmental and social impacts. Others say the visits would be an opportunity to boost the island's stagnant economy.

A judge did not grant a preliminary injunction to block the visits and allowed Holland America Line and Princess Cruises to drop out as defendants in the suit.

Holland America and Princess said they were canceling the visits pending a meeting with Molokai residents, initially planned for this past summer.

Princess spokesman Tom Dow said no date has yet been set, but plans call for representatives from Holland America, Princess and others in the cruise industry to hold a meeting on Molokai later this month.

"The main point we want to make is we have no plans to return to Molokai with big ships," Dow said.

However, the cruise line will discuss an idea to run small vessels to Molokai with cruise passengers from a large ship at Lahaina, an idea floated by some Molokai residents, Dow said.

"We're going to see if there really is interest in the community," Dow said.

Meanwhile, state officials are reviewing environmental policies for the cruise lines as the industry grows.

Former Gov. Ben Cayetano signed an agreement with cruise industry officials in October covering the cruise ships' environmental practices. The Department of Health and the North West Cruise Ship Association are preparing a one-year review of the document.

The memorandum of understanding drew criticism from some because it is an agreement rather than law.

Legislation for environmental regulations did not make it out of transportation committees last legislative session. Next year, legislators will be looking at laws from other states.

"Many of us don't see support for the cruise industry and environmental regulation as contradictory," said Brian Schatz, chairman of the House economic development committee. "I think that most people in Hawaii do want this industry to grow but they don't want junk dumped in their waters."

The Sierra Club of Hawaii is working on a legislative proposal that would mirror laws governing cruise ships that visit Alaska.

"We're ill-equipped for an increase in cruise traffic because we lack the regulations to adequately protect our coastal waters," said Jeff Miura, director of the Sierra Club of Hawaii.

Larry Lau, state deputy director for environmental health, who is overseeing discussions with the cruise industry, said the resources for monitoring may become an issue as ship arrivals grow.

Reach Kelly Yamashita at 535-2470, or at kyamashita@hnladvertiser.com.