

From Idaho to the Solomon Islands

Credit union officials assist nation still whirling from an April tsunami

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REXBURG – Credit union leaders in land-locked Idaho believe they have something to offer an island nation that is looking to the future.

This month, three Idaho Credit Union officials, including Shane Berger, CEO of Beehive Federal Credit Union and chairman of the Idaho Credit Union League, will be traveling to the Solomon Islands to see how they can help credit unions there.

The island nation is situated in the South Pacific east of New Guinea. Berger said the nation, composed of more than 800 islands, is recovering from a tsunami that hit the area in April. He said the country is also anxious to develop businesses and promote tourism.

Berger will be joined by Alan Cameron, president and CEO of the Idaho Credit Union League and Glenda Hart, vice chairwoman of the league and CEO of Latah Federal Credit Union in Moscow.

They will be stopping for several days in Brisbane, Australia to meet with credit union people from the Credit Union Foundation Australia who will also be involved in the Solomon Island project.

When the three leave Australia to travel to the Solomons, they will be accompanied by two members of the Credit Union Foundation Australia and a member of the World Council of Credit Unions.

"When we get there, we will assess their needs," Berger said.

He said many of the people live in rural settings and don't have access to financial institutions.

"What we hope to do is teach them the basic principles of things like accounting and operational efficiencies," he said. "We want to help them with human resource policies and issues, problems they might experience; basically to assess their needs so that we can provide future help on things like computer operations."

Berger will arrive in Australia on Oct. 24 after a personal visit to Thailand, and then the group will travel to the Solomon Islands on Oct. 28.

He said they will spend three and a half days working with credit unions in Honiara, the capital city, on the island of Guadalcanal, and then take a small plane to the island of Malaita for a day and a half of work there. They will then travel back to Guadalcanal for a day of educational seminars and then return to Brisbane. The group from Idaho plans to be back home Nov. 6.

According to information from the Idaho Credit Union League, credit unions began organizing in the Solomon Islands during the 1980s. The Solomon Island Credit Union League is composed of 159 credit unions and since it was established in 1987, it has helped increase the number of credit unions and also the development of Micro-finance Rural Resource Centers where people in small rural communities pool their funds in savings clubs.

Berger said the Micro-finance Rural Resource Centers provide a financial resource for people in isolated areas.



In this April 2 photo, residents of the village of Noro in the Solomon Islands wade through the main street after water subsided from a tsunami caused by an earthquake that hit the south Pacific in the early hours of the morning. Parts of the Solomon Island including Munda and Gizo, were hit by an earthquake that measured 8.1, causing a tsunami to hit the coastline and forcing residents to flee to the hills for cover

Villages elect treasurers to hand-carry these pooled savings to the nearest road and then buy passage on a truck to take them to a credit union for deposit, which is frequently a two-day trip.

Berger said small loans from these funds have enabled people to start their own businesses.

"Credit unions started that way," Berger said. "It's the same cooperative idea of people pooling their money together. When we go to the Solomons, we'll go back to the roots of credit unions. We'll only have time to go to one other island besides Guadalcanal, but the seeds will go from there. I'm looking forward to the trip and seeing if I can learn what I need to learn and help where I need to help.

Berger said as the partnership progresses, Idaho Credit Union League officials plan to help credit union officials from the Solomons visit Idaho so the exchange of ideas can continue.