

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI‘I SYSTEM LEGISLATIVE TESTIMONY



HB 2451, Relating to Agriculture
HB 2452, Relating to Agriculture
HB 2453, Relating to Taro

Testimony Presented Before the
House Committee on Agriculture

January 30, 2008 at 8:30 a.m.

by
Virginia S. Hinshaw
Chancellor
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

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Chair Cliff Tsuji, Vice Chair Brower, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity. The University cannot support this bill because of our pressing priorities, such as R&M and health and safety issues, which are critical to our ability to perform our core mission.

We appreciate that this might be an important priority for the state, so we wanted to provide the following information to assist you in your decision-making.

HB 2451 directs the UH Mānoa College of Tropical Agriculture (CTAHR), in consultation with native Hawaiian organizations and taro farmers, to establish a taro farming education and training program and appropriates funds.

HB 2452 directs CTAHR, in consultation with the Hawai'i Department of Health, to establish a program for commercial taro farmers to maximize business viability and success, and appropriates funds.

HB 2453 appropriates funds for a taro farming grant program to assist taro farmers in need to help preserve the cultural legacy of taro farming for future generations.

CTAHR has a long history of working with taro growers to improve taro varieties, increase disease resistance, and help solve their pressing production problems. Since the establishment of the Hawai'i Agricultural Experiment Station more than a century ago, diseases of taro have been a focus of our research. Sadly, during that century, the Hawai'i acreage planted in taro has declined by more than 70 percent, and taro production in the state has fallen to historic lows. Among the factors contributing to these losses are invasive diseases and pests such as taro leaf blight, pocket rot, and apple snails; rising crop and land costs coupled with competition from inexpensive imports; lack of access to high-quality water and land resources; declines in taro biodiversity; and a decrease in the number of farmers able to sustain themselves by growing this labor-intensive crop.

CTAHR recognizes and respects the cultural significance of Hawaiian taro. We know that recent years have seen heated debate as to what our college's role should be in protecting this important crop. We have been participating in dialogue with taro farmers from each island, the Hawai'i Department of Agriculture, the Hawaii Farm Bureau Federation, and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs. That dialogue has led to the development of the recommendations included in the attached draft report. We feel that the best way to proceed forward is to honor the process agreed to in this dialogue by forming a taro security and purity task force in order to guide policy and prioritize research for the protection of taro in Hawai'i, including ways to help taro growers achieve greater economic viability.

One way in which CTAHR is currently fostering economic viability for growers of diversified crops including taro is through the University of Hawai'i's Agribusiness Incubator Program, which is described in the attached literature. The AIP provides business consulting services to start-up agribusinesses and to established companies seeking to expand that might not otherwise have access to such assistance. Preference is given to businesses that benefit Native Hawaiians. AIP consultants offer their clients assistance in the areas of strategy, business and marketing planning, financial assessment, process improvement, and project management. In addition, the incubator participates in community-based efforts to promote diversified agriculture in the state. The AIP has assisted in the past, is currently assisting, and will continue to assist taro farmers throughout the state.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on these bills.