HB 2676 HD1 - RELATING TO AGRICULTURE

Chair Choy, Vice Chair Ichiyama, and members of the House Committee on Higher Education, thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of HB 2676 HD1, which appropriates funds to the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa, College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (CTAHR), Agribusiness Incubator Program for the establishment of a five-year energy independent farming community pilot project.

We support this measure provided that its passage does not replace or adversely impact priorities as indicated in the University’s Board of Regents Approved Executive Budget.

Beginning farmers in Hawaiʻi face substantial difficulties in obtaining affordable land to farm that is accessible and has adequate infrastructure. Additionally, most new farmers must live in one location, and commute to their agricultural land. The lease or mortgage costs associated with maintaining two pieces of property (residence and farm), the costs of commuting, and high risk of agricultural vandalism and theft at unattended farm lots, make this a very difficult, if not impossible, situation for the future generation of farmers. The resulting decline in those entering farming and succeeding at it threatens the food security of Hawaiʻi.

HB 2676 HD1 proposes to investigate and implement a novel solution to this dilemma by establishing sustainable, energy-independent farming communities on state land. These communities would share central facilities, with homes located adjacent to each tenant’s farm. Modern technologies make such essentially off-the-grid communities with alternative energy sources, water reuse, and small, low-cost housing units a viable proposition.

The Agribusiness Incubator Program (AIP) has contributed to the business success of many small farmers and food producers in Hawaiʻi. Planning of such a farming community pilot project, including identification of economic and regulatory obstacles and possible solutions, is within the program’s area of expertise. First year costs for planning and business plan development would be $150,000 for AIP personnel and operational support. Other state agencies are expected to become involved as partners in subsequent years to address the business infrastructure and land stewardship needs of the pilot project.

The decline in new farmers is a serious issue for Hawaiʻi that demands novel approaches. We greatly appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of HB 2676 HD1.