What is a Cooperative Fisheries Research Unit?

The Cooperative Research Unit program was established in 1935 to enhance graduate education in fisheries and wildlife sciences and to facilitate research between natural resource agencies and universities on topics of mutual concern. Today, there are 40 Cooperative Research Units in 38 states. Each unit is a partnership among the U.S. Geological Survey, a State natural resource agency, a host university, and the Wildlife Management Institute. Staffed by Federal personnel, Cooperative Research Units conduct research on renewable natural resource questions, participate in the education of graduate students, provide technical assistance and consultation on natural resource issues, and provide continuing education for natural resource professionals.

What is involved in a Cooperative Agreement?

The USGS provides salary and support (e.g., boats, vehicles, equipment) for two unit scientists who serve as faculty members in the departments in which they are housed, as advisors to graduate students as well as providing research and training to both graduate and undergraduate students. The university provides lab and office space, as well as administrative support to the unit. The State Department of Land and Natural Resources coordinates research activities with the Coop Unit and the University and provides financial support to the unit on an annual basis.

What is the history of the Hawaii Cooperative Fisheries Unit?

The Hawaii Cooperative Fisheries Research Unit (hereafter, the “Coop Unit”) was established in 1966 at UH Manoa and provides the only graduate program in fisheries in the state of Hawaii and teaches the only graduate-level course in fisheries science at UH. Importantly, UH Manoa is the only campus which grants Ph.D. degrees in biological sciences, and the Coop Unit has been very successful in recruiting highly-qualified Ph.D. students which are critical to fulfilling its mission of cutting-edge marine science and conservation biology research. In fact, the Coop Unit has trained many of the biologists who work at state and federal agencies throughout Hawaii and the US Pacific region. Through its close collaboration with the State Department of Land and Natural Resources, and numerous other state and federal agencies for over 40 years, it has conducted research into virtually every aspect of fisheries and marine resource management in Hawaii, providing unparalleled opportunities for its students in applied conservation research and a natural conduit to government employment. This close collaboration has been an extremely cost effective way to improve fisheries and marine resource management while also improving the quality of fisheries research in Hawaii. In addition, a number of former Coop Unit students have gone on to highly successful academic careers.

The Coop Unit has a long history of academic productivity and has trained a large number of graduate students (43 M.S. Theses, 13 Ph.D. dissertations). Currently, there is one unit scientist and one vacancy due to a recent retirement. The current scientist supports three Ph.D. students, three M.S. students, and two undergraduates and has produced more than 30 peer-reviewed publications, 10 book chapters, and more than one million dollars in grants in the past five years. The USGS has indicated its intent to fill the vacant position and possibly expand to include a third scientist, a terrestrial wildlife biologist. The leadership of the Coop Unit in fisheries and marine science is well documented by the solicitations from numerous funding organizations to
conduct applied research to address significant resource management questions and the number of invitations received to collaborate on joint research efforts at the state, national, and international levels. The unit’s knowledge of fisheries and marine science is widely sought by management agencies, NGOs, community groups, and the public media. In summary, the Hawaii Cooperative Fisheries Research Unit has been a leader in cutting edge fisheries and marine conservation research at a global level and the continued relationship with UH Manoa is beneficial to the university, the Coop Unit, and the residents of Hawaii as well as the broader scientist community.

What are the impacts of relocating the Coop Unit from UH Manoa to UH Hilo?

Three facts remain as significant impediments for the Coop Unit in fulfilling it's mission at UH Hilo:

- UH Hilo does not have a Ph.D. Program.
- The fisheries interests of UH Hilo are related to Aquaculture. This is distinctly different from both the UH Manoa and USGS Coop Units emphasis on conservation and management of wild fish populations and ecosystems.
- The Coop Unit works in close collaboration with the National Marine Fisheries Offices and State Department of Aquatic Resources Offices and other groups (e.g., The Nature Conservancy, US Fish and Wildlife Service), all of which are located in Honolulu.
- Much of the Hawaii-based research of the Coop Unit is based on Oahu.

The removal of the Coop Unit from UH Manoa will have severe negative consequences on the current unit faculty member, and the graduate and undergraduate students who are supported and mentored.

- Current Coop Unit graduate students (3 Ph.D., 3 M.S.) will have to decide amongst remaining in residence at UHM without their advisor, to switch advisors, or to relocate to UH Hilo and complete their degree program in absentia. The M.S. students will have the option to transfer to UH Hilo’s M.S. program.
- The Coop Unit faculty will be at a significant disadvantage in their efforts to recruit and train Ph.D. students without ready access to a Ph.D. program.
- UH Hilo's strength is limited to aquaculture (the farming of fish, shrimp, and other aquatic food crops). In contrast, the primary focus of the Coop Unit is marine fisheries science (the monitoring of natural populations of fish and ecosystems, primarily in the ocean), as well as marine conservation including coral reefs. At UHM, the Coop Unit interacts with an extensive network of colleagues in multiple colleges across campus.

Negative consequences to the Biology department and across campus:

- The Coop Unit faculty members teach courses in fisheries science and coral reef ecology in the Biology department, the only such courses taught within the UH system.
- There will be significant loss in research grants and projects for UHM Biology and CNS.
- The relocation of the Coop Unit is coming just as a new graduate program in Marine Biology Graduate Program is coming online. The loss of fisheries and marine conservation expertise will be a great loss to the program, which is a multi-college effort and interdisciplinary in nature.
- The faculty member serves on a number of student committees in other colleges across the UH Manoa campus (e.g., SOEST, Geography).
- Graduate and Undergraduate students at UHM Biology interested in government or NGO careers in conservation and management will lose our only colleagues with connections to the US government. While UHM Biology has ample expertise in academic biology, our primary providers of government career training and training in marine resource management and conservation are the Coop Unit faculty.

What Precipitated the President’s Decision to move the Coop Unit to Hilo?

The decision by President Greenwood to relocate the Coop Unit to UH Hilo is preceded by a personnel issue over two years ago. For some years, the USGS was not happy with the level of administrative support provided by the University via support from the interim Dean of CNS. An agreement was reached between the interim Dean of CNS and USGS to fill the vacant Coop Unit faculty position in exchange for upgrading the current administrative support. After the interim Dean of CNS was not successful in upgrading the administrative position, the staff member in question filed a grievance against Dr. Friedlander, Dr. Womersley (Chair of Biology), and a graduate student on an unrelated issue.

According to the Cooperative Agreement Section V Article 2, the University agrees to recognize Coop Unit scientists as regular faculty members (excerpt from the Cooperative Agreement):

“Recognize, as regular members of the University faculty, those research scientists of the Survey who are assigned to the Unit. These personnel shall have full faculty rights and privileges and be given professional rank appropriate to their qualifications. Survey personnel shall be given graduate faculty appointments, providing such personnel meet the standards and requirements of the University. Survey personnel shall be eligible for promotion in University rank in accordance with normal University standards and procedures but will not be tenured or salaried by the University.”

Although the University agrees to recognize Coop Faculty as regular members of the University faculty with full faculty rights, at no time was Dr. Friedlander given due process in the ensuing “investigation,” as would be accorded to a member of the regular faculty.

Michael Nauyokas, the attorney hired by Dr. Friedlander, wrote to Dr. Friedlander’s supervisor Dr. Joe Margraf in February 2011: “If in fact Dr. Friedlander were a state employee as Dr. Teramura hypothesizes, Dr. Friedlander would be subject to the University’s Collective Bargaining Agreement. The Agreement only allows discipline for just cause, which requires the University prove seven tests. Dr. Teramura provides no record of such tests in his investigation .... I highly recommend that immediate action be taken at once to insure that a proper investigation be conducted.”

Despite repeated calls by the Biology faculty for relief and intervention by the UHM administrative hierarchy, Dr. Friedlander's status with the university was in limbo, and a year passed before the personnel incident was ultimately resolved.
At about the same time, President Greenwood requested VC Ostrander (UHM) and Chancellor Straney (UHH) to develop proposals for the reestablishment of the Coop Unit. This fact was unknown to UHM Biology. The department was never consulted on the matter, and to this day UHM Biology has not seen the proposal sent forth on behalf of the Manoa campus.

While these deliberations were occurring, the CNS successfully recruited a new and permanent Dean who is in full support of efforts to strengthen Marine Biology in the CNS. Before the CNS Dean assumed his new position, President Greenwood confirmed that the unit would be moved to UH Hilo.

President Greenwood gave testimony to the Manoa Faculty Senate Executive Committee on October 19, 2011, stating that the USGS was dissatisfied with the UHM experience and thought that UH Hilo would be a better home for the unit. What is not mentioned is that the dissatisfaction is with the administrative support which is easily remedied with support from the new Dean of CNS, and that it is USGS policy to remain neutral on the campus location of Coop Units. Coop Units are awarded to the University system, and the placement of the Hawai'i unit at Hilo or Manoa is solely at the discretion of the University President (see email confirmation from USGS supervisor Joe Margraf).

The faculty of the UHM Biology department remains gravely concerned about the loss of such a critical component of the department. Furthermore, this decision was made without faculty consultation, and thus the department had no opportunity for input regarding negative impacts of this decision. This loss of fisheries and marine science expertise comes at precisely the time when the department is engaged in new initiatives to build strength in Marine Biology and to revitalize and modernize the recently merged Biology department. Additionally, the loss of faculty positions will be especially difficult as faculty numbers are at a historical low resulting from recent retirements and hiring freezes. Despite repeated requests for information, intervention, and action by the administration, the Biology department was not kept informed about the status of it's Coop Faculty, nor the situation of the Coop Unit.

Thus, it seems that in the absence of explanation by President Greenwood, this entire incident stems from a mishandled personnel issue that was ultimately elevated to the level of the President. At no time was Dr. Friedlander nor the Biology Faculty consulted in the move of the Coop Unit from UH Manoa to UH Hilo.