



# UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

## Legislative Testimony

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Testimony Presented Before the  
House Committee on Hawaiian Affairs  
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by  
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### HB 1663 RELATING TO TARO SECURITY

The University of Hawaii supports this bill with amendments.

The University of Hawaii (UH) is sensitive to and mindful of the spiritual and cultural significance of taro in Hawaii. By releasing its patents on non-Hawaiian, disease resistant, traditionally cross-bred, hybrid taro into the public domain and entering into an agreement to consult with the Hawaiian community before conducting any research on genetically engineered Hawaiian taro, the University has demonstrated not only its respect for the cultural significance of Hawaiian taro, but also its desire to expand and enhance its interactions with the Hawaiian taro farmers and the native Hawaiian community.

UH is working on many fronts to establish trust with the Hawaiian community, including, among other efforts, its participation on the Taro Task Force. That Task Force, created by the Legislature as Act 211 in 2008, is currently meeting and driving positive dialogue to address the multitude of threats to Hawaiian taro. We believe it would be prudent for this Legislature to examine the outcomes of the Taro Task Force's efforts before supporting any further legislation regarding taro research.

Although the UH is a publicly funded university, its research obligations reach around the world. Our expertise in ocean sciences, tropical ecology and Asian & Pacific languages not only make us the best university locally, but one of the most highly respected university in the Pacific region. We believe that research on Hawaiian taro in Hawaii should only be done at the invitation of the Hawaiian community. We also believe however, that the research expertise of the UH cannot be legislated away from the real needs of real people in developing nations who are challenged by the loss of their staple taro crops due to the effects of new diseases and global warming and the pressures of overpopulation.

The UH proposes that this bill be amended such that research and development of non-Hawaiian taro varieties can be conducted in Hawaii within certain limits. These limits would allow laboratory and greenhouse development of new, non-Hawaiian, taro varieties, but would prohibit the testing of these varieties in unsecured facilities or release into the environment of Hawaii. Field testing and commercial propagation of successful new varieties would only be done outside of the state.

The UH strongly believes that any legislation should use an accurate and scientifically accepted definition of terms. The definition of "genetic modification" as provided in this bill is scientifically inaccurate and serves only to add confusion to this issue. Furthermore, the term "release" is defined only in terms of genetic engineering. We suggest that the term "genetic engineering"

and an appropriate definition replace “genetic modification” in this bill as this is the accurate intent of this legislation.

In closing, UH reiterates that it is not now, nor does it have plans to genetically engineer Hawaiian taro. UH has an agreement in place with the Hawaiian community and UH has every intention of upholding the terms of that agreement. We continue to participate in the Taro Task Force in order to build trust and keep communication with the Hawaiian taro farmers clear and open. We firmly believe that by working together we can find a middle ground where culture and science can complement each other.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this bill.