



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

Legislative Testimony

Written Testimony Presented Before the
House Committee on Finance
Friday, February 26, 2016 at 1:00 p.m.

By

Robert Bley-Vroman, Chancellor

And

Maria Gallo, Dean

And

J. Kenneth Grace, Associate Dean

College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

HB 1597 HD1 – RELATING TO ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Chair Luke, Vice Chair Nishimoto, and members of the House Committee on Finance, thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of HB 1597 HD1, which appropriates funds to the Department of Agriculture for research and mitigation efforts relating to the rapid ohia death disease in the State.

Rapid ohia death, caused by a fungal pathogen first identified in 2014, has spread extremely rapidly on the Big Island, from 15,000 acres of ohia forest infected by the disease in 2014, to 34,000 in 2016. Ohia makes up half the acreage, and half the woody biomass, of all the forests in Hawai'i. Loss of ohia across the state will severally impact our endangered forest birds that depend on the trees for nesting sites, and will intensify invasion of the forest by invasive plant species such as strawberry guava that use more water than ohia, with negative impacts on the watershed. From a cultural standpoint, it is difficult to imagine Hawai'i without ohia and the lehua flowers. Further, forests of dead trees will greatly damage tourism, particularly on the Big Island, and greatly increase fire hazards.

The nursery industry in Hawai'i has also been impacted by rapid ohia death, since it has been necessary to impose a quarantine on soil movement from the Big Island to prevent possible spread of the disease.

Researchers from state and federal agencies and the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (CTAHR) are working to address the spread and management of this severe plant disease, but their efforts are limited by resources and by the absence of prior information on this devastating and very rapidly spreading forest disease. HB 1597 HD1 would appropriate the funds necessary to increase these research and management efforts before the disease devastates Big Island forests, and spreads across the state.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of HB 1597 HD1.