UNIVERSITY OF HAWAIʻI SYSTEM
Legislative Testimony

Written Testimony Presented Before the
House Committee on Water and Land
Friday, February 12, 2016 at 9:30 a.m.
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HB 2675 – RELATING TO RAPID OHIA DEATH

Chair Yamane, Vice Chair Cullen, and members of the House Committee on Water and Land, thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of HB 2675, which appropriates funds to the Department of Agriculture for research to combat rapid ohia death.

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 Hawaiʻi. 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 Hawaiʻi 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 Hawaiʻi 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 2675 would appropriate $325,000 to increase these research efforts before the disease devastates Big Island forests, and spreads across the state.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify in support of HB 2675.