



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I SYSTEM

TESTIMONY

SB958 RELATING TO GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS

Testimony Presented Before the
Senate Water, Land, Agriculture, and Hawaiian Affairs Committee

January 29, 2007
By

James Gaines
Interim Vice President for Research
University of Hawaii

DATE: January 29, 2007
1:30PM, Conference Room 414

TO: COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
Senator Russell S. Kokubun, Chair
Senator Jill N. Tokuda, Vice Chair

FROM: James Gaines
Interim Vice President for Research
University of Hawaii

RE: Testimony In Opposition of SB958

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in opposition to SB958 which provides for a ten-year moratorium on testing, propagating, cultivating, raising, and growing of genetically modified taro in the State of Hawaii.

The University of Hawaii's history of supporting agriculture and farming in Hawaii goes back to the beginning of the last century and its contributions to those activities are well documented. As the primary research organization of the State of Hawaii, the university is sensitive to legislation that may impede its research and educational mission especially when such legislation is proposed on the basis of the unknown or untested consequences resulting from these activities.

The proposed, ten-year moratorium on testing, propagating, cultivating, raising, and growing of genetically modified taro in the State of Hawaii is both short-sighted and unnecessary. The primary effect of such an action would put the Hawaiian taro crop at risk in two ways. First the momentum of research in this area would cease and our faculty would be forced to move in to other areas of inquiry. More problematic however would be our inability to address a sudden and/or rapidly spreading outbreak of plant disease or invasive species that may attack our taro crops.

Invasive species pose constant challenges to the agriculture industry as well as the environment in Hawaii. The continual inflow of invasive species is unpredictable and may have far-reaching effects. The current situation with indigenous wili wili (*Erythrina sandwiciensis*) trees being decimated by an invasive gall-wasp species is a good illustration. Taro is also prone to effects of invasive species, particularly plant diseases. Currently, the Alomae/Bobone Virus Disease Complex is decimating taro production in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, and there are no known varieties of taro that are resistant to this virus complex. The University conducts research on such issues and has contributed significantly to the protection of agriculture in the State through such actions.

Development of a transgenic plant may take five to seven years to perfect. Most of this work is conducted in laboratories and green houses precisely so that any adverse effects or undesirable characteristics are examined and evaluated before field trials begin. In addition, there is an extensive permitting process under the US Department of Agriculture with oversight by the Hawaii Department of Agriculture that must be undertaken before any engineered plant is allowed to be tested in the field.

Please do not misinterpret our opposition to this bill. The University of Hawaii is very sensitive to the cultural and spiritual significance of Hawaiian taro. We recognize that genetic engineering and commercialization of Hawaiian taro are activities that affront our Native Hawaiian community and we respect their wishes to preserve the genetic purity of that species. This bill however, does not address those issues. Instead of empowering our communities to secure, cherish, and preserve Hawaiian taro through research and innovation, SB958 impedes the progress of science and places artificial constraints on the ingenuity and creativity of our people. A moratorium on research does little to protect Hawaiian taro, but it may significantly impact our ability to move forward and discover new methods that may save this crop for the benefit of future generations.

Mahalo for your consideration,