



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

Legislative Testimony

Testimony Presented Before the
SENATE COMMITTEE ON WATER, LAND, AGRICULTURE, AND HAWAIIAN AFFAIRS

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by

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SB 709 SD1 RELATING TO TARO SECURITY

The University of Hawaii opposes SB709 SD1as written and offers 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 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 taro in Hawaii. 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 restrictions on taro research in our state.

Although the UH is a publically 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 most prominent research institution in the state, but one of the most highly respected universities 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 that the research expertise of the UH and the use of the most modern and cutting edge tools of genetic engineering should not be legislated away from solving real problems of real people in developing nations, some of whom are confronted by the loss of their staple taro crops due to the invasion of new diseases, the effects of global warming and the pressures of overpopulation. These challenges and others like them are not cultural issues, but ones of humanity in the global community.

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 accurate and scientifically accepted definitions 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 the term “genetic modification” in this bill as we believe the restriction of genetic engineering in taro 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. The university does not want to impose its science on the Hawaiian community, but wishes only to reserve the ability to use the best science available to address imminent agricultural issues in the global community. UH has an agreement in place with the Hawaiian community regarding research on Hawaiian taro and UH has every intention of upholding the terms of that agreement. We look forward to continuing to participate in the Taro Task Force in order to both build trust and keep communication with the Hawaiian taro farmers clear and open. We firmly believe that by working together we can find a mutually respectful middle ground where culture is embraced and honored and where science progresses in a complementary way.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this bill.