UNIVERSITY OF HAWAIʻI SYSTEM
Legislative Testimony

Written Testimony Presented Before the
Senate Committee on Water, Land, and Agriculture
And
Senate Committee on Economic Development, Environment, and Technology
Monday, March 28, 2016 at 2:45 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 Hawaiʻi at Mānoa

SCR 38 – REQUESTING THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE TO CONVENE A TASK FORCE TO DOCUMENT AND COLLECT DATA IDENTIFYING ECONOMIC, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND REGULATORY CONSEQUENCES OF CROP DEGRADATION CAUSED BY INVASIVE AND ENDANGERED SPECIES IN HAWAII.

Chairs Gabbard and Wakai, Vice Chairs Nishihara and Slom, and members of the Senate Committee on Water, Land, and Agriculture, and Senate Committee on Economic Development, Environment, and Technology, thank you for the opportunity to submit comments with strong reservations on SCR 38, which requests the Department of Agriculture to convene a task force to document and collect data identifying economic, environmental, and regulatory consequences of crop degradation caused by invasive and endangered species in Hawaiʻi.

Although we appreciate that the intent of SCR 38 is to obtain a complete and comprehensive review, evaluation, and recommendations for management of all impacts of all invasive and endangered species with respect to agricultural crops, urban horticulture, and natural resources affecting rural or urban horticulture in Hawaiʻi, this is an enormous task. Thus, we must express strong reservations about the practicality of implementing SCR 38, which appropriates no funding for this daunting task, and asks that it be accomplished within a very short six month time frame.

Virtually all of the many pests, plant diseases, and weeds impacting agricultural and other resources in the state are invasive species. Moreover, this is a moving target – a recent survey by the Department of Agriculture found that an average of 28 new insects are introduced to Hawaiʻi each year.

Hawaiʻi is also commonly referred to as “the endangered species capital of the world.” Endangered species are by definition rare and in danger of extinction, although some, and particularly birds, are known to damage crops. Evaluation of all possible scenarios and impacts is a challenging task.

Comprehensive studies of the impact of a single invasive pest generally take from one to three years, depending upon the information available, as was the case with the recently completed economic evaluation of little fire ant in Hawai‘i. A much more realistic approach in this case would be to focus on a either a single invasive species; or, if endangered bird species are the intended target of this resolution, to craft a resolution requesting the relevant agencies and the federal Department of Fish and Wildlife to evaluate this limited problem, with a longer time frame for such evaluation.

SCR 38 rightly points out the need for a coordinated approach to both mitigation of invasive species, and evaluation of the relationship of endangered species to agriculture and natural resources in Hawai‘i. However, with no funds provided and an unrealistically short time frame, we do not believe that the approach described in SCR 38 is practical to implement, nor is it likely to result in production of the information requested.

For the reasons stated above, while we appreciate the intent, we must express strong reservations about SCR 38.