

Hawaii News

Isle public schools enticed to “buy fresh, buy local”

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Lt. Gov. Shan Tsutsui spoke in support of the statewide Farm to School Program at the Capitol on Wednesday.

Darren Strand, president of Maui Gold Pineapple Co., sells fresh and frozen pineapple to customers as far away as Japan, but getting Hawaii's emblematic fruit into local public school cafeterias is a tougher order.

“It’s really frustrating to see how much pineapple they eat in the schools and none of it’s from Hawaii,” said Strand, whose company has 1,000 acres in cultivation. “So we’d like to fix that.”

The “buy fresh, buy local” movement has caught on at high-end restaurants and grocers across the islands, where customers are willing to pay a premium for locally grown fruits, vegetables, dairy and meat.

That’s not yet the case in the public schools with their limited food budget, but the Farm to School initiative is gaining momentum.

A survey of farmers, ranchers and distributors statewide by the Department of Agriculture, conducted throughout April, will help gauge what’s being harvested, where, and how best to get it into the schools. The state’s first Farm to School coordinator, Robyn Pfahl, will use the results to analyze the market, seek proposals and launch some pilot projects.

“We are looking at ways to change how we do business,” Pfahl said. “Price is a consideration but it’s not the only consideration. We are looking at how to incentivize Hawaii-grown.”

Farmers like Strand had a chance to showcase their products and get tips on how to become a qualified vendor to state facilities at an information session and mixer at the Capitol on Wednesday. The event was hosted by Lt. Gov. Shan Tsutsui, the Department of Agriculture, the Hawaii Farm Bureau and the Kohala Center.

BY THE NUMBERS

Food in Hawaii’s public schools:

110,000

Meals served daily

256

Public school cafeterias

\$39 million

Annual food budget

\$5.50

Total cost to produce one school lunch

\$1.93

Cost of just the food in a school lunch

Source: Department of Education, Food Services Branch

The Department of Education serves roughly 110,000 meals a day at 256 school cafeterias, and it usually buys in bulk statewide for cost savings. But the school system is looking at breaking things down by island or region, to allow some direct purchasing in smaller amounts, Pfahl said.

Farmer Mark Hamamoto hopes to get in on that. His 6-acre Mohala Farms in Waialua raises a wide range of crops, including tomatoes, kale, lettuce, lilikoi, eggplant, bananas and breadfruit.

“We’re a small organic farm,” he said, displaying his colorful harvest at the Capitol. “We would love to supply some schools. It would just have to be in a limited amount.”

Perhaps the biggest hurdle for the public schools is the price of local produce. The Department of Education spends just \$1.93 on food costs for each school lunch, including milk, according to Dexter Kishida, school food services supervisor. That’s just 35 percent of the overall cost of producing the meal because of labor, overhead and other costs.

But federal initiatives, such as the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, offer more funding flexibility, he said. And though Hawaii-grown food is often expensive, lettuce and tomatoes are largely on par price-wise with their mainland counterparts these days, University of Hawaii researchers have found.

Schools can also tap into crops that farmers might not harvest because of size or cosmetic concerns, Pfahl said. The many strawberries plowed under in Kula, Maui, every harvest could instead be turned into puree, she said.

Maui Gold’s frozen pineapple chunks are another example. The company uses fruit that’s too small to sell as fresh whole pineapple, cutting and freezing it within a day of harvest.

“We’ve retrofitted our equipment to cut up and make chunks out of the small fruit that normally would just be left in the field,” Strand said. “This is truly a recovery opportunity for us.”

He is hopeful about the prospects for getting his fruit onto local school menus.

“We feel like we’re ready,” he said as he offered juicy samples on toothpicks at the Capitol. “We certainly have the volume, we certainly meet all the regulations and the requirements and I think we’re probably at a competitive price point.”

Scott Enright, chairman of the Board of Agriculture, said his department is fully committed to building the link between local farms and local schools, and he is heartened by the support of the lieutenant governor, who is spearheading the initiative.

“Hawaii’s agricultural industry is facing many challenges, and this initiative will help to provide new business prospects for island farmers,” Enright said.

Dann Carlson, assistant superintendent of school facilities at the Department of Education, considers Farm to School the right thing to do for the children and for this remote island state.

“We are completely on board with this,” Carlson said. “We want nothing more than to provide healthy food for our kids and to be able to do that from a local source. As a former military person, I would call it food security for us.”

“It’s not going to be easy,” added Carlson, who used to be deputy commander at Joint Base Pearl Harbor- Hickam. “There are procurement issues that obviously we’ll struggle with. But we are committed to working through them and trying to make this program a success.”

At this point it isn’t clear how much local food is served in public school cafeterias, because the department doesn’t track the origin of each item.

A few charter schools, which manage their own food budgets, are leading the way. At Kona Pacific Public Charter School on Hawaii island, 42 percent of the food purchased in the 2014-15 school year was produced in the state, according to a September report from the Kohala Center, “Local Foods in Hawaii’s Schools.” Volcano School of Arts & Sciences has also been procuring roughly the same amount of its food locally.