

For Immediate Release

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The Kohala Center announces beginning farmer training program *USDA grants seek to train and support next generation of American farmers*

KAMUELA, Hawai‘i—October 25, 2012—[United States Department of Agriculture](#) (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack recently announced \$18 million in federal funding to support new farmer training and education programs in 27 states. The Kohala Center received a \$562,000 grant to create and deliver *Ku I Ka Mana*, a beginning farmer training initiative. The County of Hawai‘i is providing the necessary matching funds to secure the USDA grant.

Starting in the Hāmākua region of Hawai‘i Island, [The Kohala Center](#), in partnership with several local government agencies and academic institutions, will recruit, train, and support at least 40 new farmers over the next two years. The program will also help these new farmers develop business plans, secure farm leases, gain access to farm equipment and materials, and successfully produce, market, and distribute their crops. As part of this program, The Kohala Center is developing a farm training site in Honoka‘a, which will be used to teach successful farming practices.

Ku I Ka Mana supports several primary goals of The Kohala Center, state and county governments, island leaders, and community groups: to increase local food production, decrease dependency on imports, diversify Hawai‘i Island’s rural economy, create jobs, and promote greater self-reliance.

Though there are abundant fertile lands and a 12-month growing season, Hawai‘i Island imports approximately 85 percent of its food from at least 2,500 miles away. Issues such as food security, energy costs, and time required to transport perishable food make the need to increase local food production even more critical. To address some of the island’s economic challenges and take advantage of its resources, a primary recommendation of the [County of Hawai‘i’s Agriculture Development Plan](#) is to “expand Hawai‘i Island food production so that 30 percent of its residents’ demand for food can be supplied by local producers by 2020.” With its abundant natural resources, available farmland, consistent supply of irrigation water, and its agricultural history and heritage, the Hāmākua region is well positioned to play a leadership role in agricultural development on the island and in the state.

A recent University of Hawai‘i (UH) study identifies small-scale farms producing food for local consumption as the sector of Hawai‘i’s agriculture industry with the greatest potential for future

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growth. In recent [Hāmākua Community Development Planning](#) workshops, however, the identified challenges facing potential farmers and ranchers in the area are daunting.

“While a lack of knowledge and experience in farming and ranching discourages many prospective farmers across the country from entering the industry, Hawai‘i faces additional, unique challenges,” said Dr. Elizabeth Cole, deputy director of The Kohala Center. “Higher land and resource costs, market and distribution challenges, and limited access to capital are among the hurdles that discourage both novice and experienced farmers from pursuing agricultural endeavors in the state. The Kohala Center and *Ku I Ka Mana* will help program participants navigate and overcome many of these barriers through education; access to leasable farmland, equipment, and materials; business planning; mentoring by successful island producers; and access to loans and other funding sources.”

Along with Cole, *Ku I Ka Mana* will be facilitated and managed by three prominent agricultural leaders:

- Jim Cain, a successful taro farmer and poi producer on Hawai‘i Island for 20 years. In addition to managing a farm education and consulting service, he took the lead in creating *Ku I Ka Mana*, of which he is the current director.
- Melanie Bondera, rural cooperative development specialist with the Laulima Center, and a successful family farmer on Hawai‘i Island for 10 years. Bondera will help with curriculum development, teach, and assist with the development of cooperative processing and distribution strategies.
- Dr. Russell Nagata, former professor of horticultural science, plant breeding and genetics, and plant pathology at both the University of Florida and at UH-Hilo, and current Hawai‘i County Administrator for the [College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources at UH-Mānoa](#). Nagata will provide technical expertise in curriculum development, teach in his areas of expertise, and coordinate the participation of additional UH faculty in the program.

“Across the islands, there is a growing awareness of our need for local food security,” Bondera said. “Farmers markets have grown tremendously and consumers want to buy local. Our leaders are looking to rebuild our local food system. But they have many questions; key among them ‘Where will we find the farmers?’ Our beginning farmer training program—and others like it around the state and country funded by the USDA grant program—will answer that question, and give these desperately needed new farmers the incentive, resources, and support to enter the industry and be successful.”

Beginning farmers who successfully complete the training program and create viable farm and business plans will be able to work with the State of Hawai‘i Department of Agriculture to execute short-term leases on farmlands managed by the [Hāmākua-North Hilo Agricultural Coop, County of Hawai‘i](#) and Kapulena Agricultural Park, with the understanding that satisfactory farm operation start-up will allow for longer-term land occupancy.

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“We plan for this to be a sustainable program that will live beyond the initial USDA funding,” Cain said. “We anticipate harnessing the knowledge and successes achieved during the grant period to deliver the program in at least two other areas on the island in the future. Hāmākua is an ideal place to start, and with the variety of microclimates on Hawai‘i Island, breadth of viable and available agricultural lands, and diversity of crops that can be grown here, the potential of this program to move our island communities closer to self-reliance is remarkable. This program will provide the training and support that will enable small-scale family farmers to be successful, and help make our valuable agricultural lands productive for generations to come.”

Community members interested in learning more or applying to *Ku I Ka Mana* are encouraged to visit <http://www.kohalacenter.org/farmertraining/home.html>, or contact Jim Cain at jcain@kohalacenter.org or 808-333-0457.

About The Kohala Center

The Kohala Center (<http://www.kohalacenter.org>) is an independent, community-based center for research, education, and conservation. The Center was established in direct response to the request of island residents to create greater educational and employment opportunities by enhancing—and celebrating—Hawai‘i’s spectacular natural and cultural landscapes.