

Local News

Plan for growing our own *Nonprofit pushes ag development for isle*

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Stephens Media

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Agriculture has been one of the linchpins of the Big Island economy.

Yet with all the lip service county officials give agriculture and agricultural sustainability, they've been reluctant to put their money where their mouth is.

In an era when it's more profitable to grow rooftops than radishes on prime farmland, when ranchettes are replacing the ranches of old, and paniolo are more often seen in parades than among the cattle, the statistics are sobering.

Less than 15 percent of the food consumed in the state is produced locally. In the event of a major shipping strike or a disaster, natural or man-made, it's predicted that supermarkets would run out of food within two weeks.

On this island, only one of the 2,717 county employees is charged with coordinating agricultural programs and promoting farming, and only \$147,000 of the county's \$387 million budget is set aside for this purpose.

The county administration is preparing to sell 3,516 acres of Hamakua farmland once owned by the Hamakua Sugar Co. to fill an \$8.2 million gap in the budget. A County Council committee voted 5-4 vote Tuesday to go ahead with the sale of the first 737 acres of that property.

Moving the Big Island toward food self-sufficiency is the goal of an ambitious project by the nonprofit Kohala Center, which is holding public meetings on an agriculture development plan for the county.

Meetings are set for Tuesday in Pahala, Wednesday in Hilo, Thursday in Paauilo and Nov. 4 in Pahoa. A meeting was held last week in Kona.

The draft report, written by the Kohala Center and Agricon Hawaii LLC, is available on the center's Web site, kohalacenter.org.

The report recommends increasing resources for the county's agriculture development staff in order to identify important agricultural lands, develop a comprehensive agricultural resources repository, implement a strategy to combat invasive species and develop food self-sufficiency.

It touches on bioenergy, farm tours, export crops such as florals and aquaculture as possible economic engines.

"If we believe food and agriculture are important to the island's economy and lifestyle, then we really should increase resources to that sector," said Kohala Center Deputy Director Betsy Cole.

The report also stresses education and advocacy for agriculture and sustainability, something Mayor Billy Kenoi says he agrees with.

"Sustainability is a word, it's a concept," Kenoi said at a recent benefit luncheon in Hilo for the Hawaii Island School Garden Network program. "You know we can talk agricultural sustainability all we want and read the great report that Kohala Center put out on agricultural sustainability for Hawaii Island ... but if our kids aren't farming, if they don't understand the value and importance ... our farmers don't have anyone to pass it on to."

A 2008 study by the University of Hawaii's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources concluded that replacing just 10 percent of the consumption of imported foods with locally produced foods would result in \$94 million in sales at the farm gate, generating an estimated economy-wide impact of \$188 million, \$47 million in earnings, \$6 million in state tax revenues and more than 2,300 jobs.

It asserts that Hawaii County, by virtue of its large share of local food production, has the potential to capture between 40 percent and 50 percent of increased sales, earnings and jobs, which would contribute to overall economic growth for the island.

Will Kenoi's planned sale of the Hamakua sugar lands help or hurt that effort? It's hard to say, several officials told Stephens Media.

"I don't think the property in Paauilo lends itself well to that type of agriculture," said county Finance Director Nancy Crawford, citing the lack of water for intensive, large-scale farming operations.

"You could do small-scale farming and haul your water," she said. "You'd never get rich there but you might be able to feed your family."

State Rep. Clift Tsuji, a Hilo Democrat and chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, said state efforts toward preserving farmland are in "early infancy" despite a constitutional amendment 30 years ago calling for the conservation and protection of agricultural lands.

He said financial incentives for keeping land in agriculture are just now being worked out. While he empathizes with Hawaii County's financial straits, Tsuji said protection of the land should be paramount.

"In my personal opinion, what conditions are set forth in the sales documents could require a pledge to keep the lands in agriculture in perpetuity and thus protect them from development," Tsuji said.

The county might not get as high a price given such conditions, but if the land is valuable for agriculture, it could be worth it, he said.

"The road to self-sufficiency will not become a reality without protection of our agricultural lands," Tsuji said.

Ag Development Plan meetings

Pahala Community Center

6-8 p.m. Tuesday

Hilo, Apuni Conference Room, County Building

6-8 p.m. Wednesday

Paauiilo School cafeteria

6-8 p.m. Thursday

Pahoa Community Center

6-8 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 4

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