

USDA grant helps 5 farming co-ops

October 6, 2013

By Erin Miller

A U.S. Department of Agriculture grant will help a Hawaii Island nonprofit bring training to five cooperative groups on three islands.

The USDA last week announced the \$152,000 grant to The Kohala Center. Rural Cooperative Development Specialist Melanie Bondera said the organization received the full amount it requested from the program, which aims to serve organizations with at least 51 percent of board members who are minorities or women. The Kohala Center and the five recipient groups — Palili O Kohala Cooperative, Ka'u Agricultural Water Cooperative and Cho Global Natural Farming Cooperative here, Makakuoha on Molokai and Maui Aquaponics Cooperative — all meet those criteria, Bondera said.

Each group requested different kinds of training, and the training programs will be completed by the end of 2014.

In Ka'u, a federation of five cooperative groups will get conflict resolution and avoidance training.

"Generally speaking, and not specific to Ka'u, water causes fights," Bondera said.

The Ka'u group is working on redirecting the former sugar plantation water systems in the district.

Having strong conflict avoidance and resolution measures in place will help "prevent lawsuits and vandalism and promotes cooperation," Bondera added.

In Hawi, Palili O Kohala is a cooperative of taro growers looking to open a jointly owned and operated poi processing plant. They have been working together first to master growing the traditional Hawaiian staple food, and "they're right at the point" to begin processing and selling the poi, Bondera said.

Their training will cover business operations, processing training and cooperative training, all important, Bondera said, as the group learns how to manage and share a processing plant.

Hilo-based Cho Global Natural Farming formed to sell Korean Natural Farming inputs, Bondera said. Korean Natural Farming is a form of organic farming, popularized by master Cho Han Kyu, that uses products created on the farm to sustain farm operations. Farm inputs are anything from fertilizers to products used for weed or pest control, Bondera said. The farming process relies on compost and natural liquids.

That group will get various training seminars on subjects related to the farming technique, which the University of Hawaii's College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources has studied. CTAHR researchers last year released reports on the farming method last year, noting some improvements in crop production on three Puna farms.

The Makakuoha Cooperative is a Native Hawaiian beginning farmer program, in which participants were trained through a University of Hawaii program. The farmers live and farm on Department of Hawaiian Home Lands in Hoolehua, Molokai.

"They're trying to develop a local, organic composting business," Bondera said. "They're particularly interested in growing food for local markets and want to do it organically."

Members of that cooperative will get training on Korean Natural Farming composting techniques, as well as on how they can purchase and cooperatively manage and maintain farm equipment.

Finally, the Maui Aquaponics Cooperative is a group of disabled adults moving quickly from conceptual ideas to building greenhouses and constructing aquaponics equipment, Bondera said. They will get more business training.

"It's a group of disabled adults that haven't had many work opportunities," Bondera said. "They're developing this business from scratch."

Much of the USDA's Small Socially Disadvantaged Producers Grant funding usually is directed to farms and programs in South Carolina and Mississippi, Bondera said. This is perhaps the third time any Hawaii group has received the funding.

The training and funding will really increase the capacity of the five cooperatives to create and expand their businesses, she said.

"We hope it has a good impact on the economies of our rural community," Bondera said.

<http://westhawaiitoday.com/sections/news/local-news/usda-grant-helps-5-farming-co-ops.html>

