

Agricultural Summit:
Enhancing Support Services for Hawai'i Island Food Self Reliance
University of Hawai'i at Hilo
August 9, 2013

Executive Summary and Action Items

The following contains a summary of key themes drawn from meeting notes taken at the Agricultural Summit held at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo on August 9, 2013. Items are in no particular order. Comments about and additions to this summary are welcome; please contact Jeff Melrose, project development specialist, Department of Research and Development, County of Hawai'i, at jmelrose@hawaiiicounty.gov.

Following the summary are Action Items that have come from further discussions between Don Straney, chancellor of UH Hilo; Bruce Mathews, dean of UH Hilo College of Agriculture, Forestry and Natural Resource Management (CAFNRM); and Maria Gallo, dean of UH Mānoa College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources (CTAHR).

Summary of Key Themes

Cooperatives

- Formal cooperatives are an important way to reduce costs and increase coordination.
- Building skills for cooperative management should be part of the outreach agenda that lies ahead.

Collaboration

- Relationships are key, farmer to farmer, farmer to agencies, bankers, neighbors, etc.
- Commercial farmers (organic or conventional) share much in common (economics, regulation, transportation, labor, energy costs etc) so there is every reason to be collaborative.
- The current GMO conversations have been divisive in the farm community.

Economics

- If farmers make money, farmers will farm... if not, they won't. Economics is the cornerstone of sustained local food production.
- For many crops costs are increasing while prices remain the same.
- Managing expenses is a key to successful farming.
- Building the local market place for a range of local products and farm methods is essential.
- Preserving options and developing new technologies are essential to stay in front of the curve.

- Need for timely technical farm extension support for food producers can help to mitigate farm losses.
- Preserving commercial ag tax programs (RPT, GET etc) is key to keeping costs down.
- A sustainable local economy is key to support sustainable local agriculture.

Farmer Shortage

- New farmers have difficulty getting started (access to capital, availability of land in some areas, business skills, lack of market knowledge).
- Cost of labor, the lack of farm housing in some areas, and the rising cost of health care conspire to make new farm growth difficult.
- Immigrants make up a major portion of the productive farm community. Programs and support are needed to build their success rates and industry leadership capacity.
- Future Farmers of America and 4H are two programs that help to create pathways for young farmers. Both are under supported currently.
- UH Hilo could expand its farm internship program to give students first hand farm experience and support ongoing farm operations.
- Farming is about more than just toiling in the soil. There are important social and environmental externalities that play a role in why people farm. These factors should be part of farm education programs. They are key to why many people choose to farm in the first place.

Information Exchange

- Research often doesn't always trickle down to the farmers who could use it.
- There is a need for a more centralized repository of ag research, like a robust web portal, or a set of links to existing resources.

Energy

- The island of Hawai'i has to overcome a 25% deficit in added electricity cost to compete in the O'ahu market place.
- Breaking the link to fossil fuel in an affordable fashion is critical for long term farm success.
- Small scale energy solutions and micro grids to support farm needs is important and should be part of the technical training available to farmers.

Fertilizers

- The island of Hawai'i has a soil fertility deficit based on young soils and heavy rainfall in some areas.
- There is a need for scalable technologies to transfer excess power from large and small power producers into farm fertilizers (biodigesters, small wind, solar, hydro, etc.).

Animal Feed

- Finding cost efficient means to produce local animal feeds is critical to the growth of the local beef, poultry, pork aquaculture, and dairy industries.
- Increased animal production can also serve to produce fertilizers to supplement imports and support organic growers.

Natural Farming

- Natural Farming based on Korean methods, has momentum in many island communities.
- Dry litter piggeries are particularly popular and point a way towards increased local pork production.
- Research support is badly needed to help this trend continue to flourish and to overcome regulatory issues that stand in the way.

Decentralized Ag Support Systems

- Extension services need to work with communities differently to match services with the type of farms, farmers and conditions that occur in each farm region.
- Matching service to farm area helps to build relationships between farmers and their extension agent.

Focus on the Consumer

- The success of local food production lies largely with the consumer and their commitment to choose local first.
- For some producers, the current trend in local food purchasing is already driving economic sustainability.
- School gardens and other farm-to-plate initiatives are critical to building informed consumers in the future.
- Pricing of local food products must be competitive with sources from elsewhere if they want to penetrate middle class markets and below.

Commercial vs. Organic Farmers

- Both approaches have important roles to play in producing the foods that the Hawai'i marketplace wants to consume.
- Outreach/Extension services need to target multiple approaches to help build the success of all farmers who want to produce food for local consumption.
- Specialized organic techniques like vermiculture, composting, natural pest control, etc., should be part of the ag skills menu available to all farmers.

Export vs. Local Consumption

- Many locally grown fruits are grown largely for export and their availability to the local market depend on strong export demand to support farm production.
- Building export market demand is part of keeping some local product on local shelves.
- The island of Hawai'i's food marketplace includes statewide distribution for virtually every crop grown here.

Extension Services

- Ag Extension resources need to be rebuilt with increasing emphasis on food, both commercial and small scale production.
- Many of the needed extension services (Local & Immigrant Farmer Education or LIFE, food security coaching, germ plasma repository and other research) are already being done. More resources are needed to expand these programs to meet emerging demand.

Environmental Consequences of Modern Ag

- There is concern that modern commercial agriculture has a detrimental impact on people and the environment.
- Environmental monitoring programs based on sound science should be part of the ag mission going forward.
- Education and Outreach that focuses on sound soil management practices and sound chemical use should continue as a key part of local food production.

Need for a Strategic Plan

- There are many things to do and not all of them can happen at one time.
- There was some interest in developing a simple strategic plan to help stage priorities and sequence resource allocation across a range of ag support players.
- Need to identify small, achievable steps we can take to grow local food production.
- Agreed upon priorities should make funding requests easier to accomplish.

Action Items

The following are some initial follow-up Action Items that have come from discussions between UH Hilo and CTAHR. They build on the issues raised at the August 9 summit and are just part of the work needed as this agricultural initiative moves forward.

Local Feed for Local Livestock

The Ag summit identified the development of local animal feeds as a key to increasing the local food supply from livestock and fish. UH Hilo will take the lead in pulling together a working group and draw in local and national resources to focus inquiry on that topic and to work with the livestock and aquaculture industries to find solutions to these issues. The first of these meetings will take place before the end of November.

A long awaited pilot feed facility to be located at the Pana'ewa Experimental Farm is scheduled to release its Environmental Assessment shortly and be under construction next year in partnership with the Oceanic Institute.

Providing Targeted Training for Current and Emerging Farmers

The issue of skill training for farmers was a repeating theme at the summit. Issues such as business skills, production techniques, immigrant farmer development, and others were brought up frequently. There are current initiatives, headed in the right direction to address these needs, to build on, for example:

- CTAHR's GoFarm Hawai'i, based in the Agricultural Incubator Program
- Hawai'i Community College farm training being offered currently
- The Small Business Development Center's emerging role with the county and Puna farmers
- A range of community-based farm trainings with Kohala Center, Waimea Homesteaders, etc.

There is a need for a forum to promote periodic sharing of lessons learned from these training efforts, both on Hawai'i Island and statewide. UH Hilo will work with CTAHR and the Ag Incubator Program to help promote such a forum to help continue to sharpen our collective focus on how to deliver targeted farmer training programs in a way that makes a tangible difference every time.

Small Scale Organics and Agroforestry

What have been seen as alternative approaches to agriculture like agroforestry, natural farming, and organic farming are no longer "alternative," they are increasingly main stream. These ag approaches need focused attention to help build their collective contribution to the food supply. Building the food supply from people's back yards and increasing the commercial supply of organic fruits and vegetables requires new research, different kinds of outreach, and new sources of affordable fertilizer and acceptable pest controls. There is a need to help shape the priorities of this effort based on collaboration with the people who are doing it. UH Hilo will collaborate with others to gather this community of producers and researchers for a conference in early 2014 to help set priorities and share approaches.

Technical Farmer Support

CTAHR currently has 14 extension faculty in the county of Hawai'i focusing on agricultural production research and education from 4-H to livestock to coffee pest management, but many programs are one person deep. Due to budget cuts and attrition of positions, the UH System agriculture programs are less robust than in the past. As a near term alternative, UH Hilo and CTAHR are looking at bringing in national expertise for short term engagements to supplement ag support in areas where in-house expertise is less robust. This is a near term solution and one hoped to start around the issue of feed production. Rebuilding permanent extension service support will take new budget allocations and legislative support.