



The mission of the Agricultural Leadership Foundation of Hawai'i is to provide leadership development opportunities for people committed to strengthening Hawai'i's agriculture.

COHORT XIX

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Three Key Opportunities for Growing Hawai'i's Food Production

Hawai'i's reliance on imports for 85-90% of its food¹ reinforces major vulnerabilities in the state's food system—creating pathways for invasive agricultural pests, placing communities at risk of food shortages during natural disasters, and suppressing the local farm production scale needed to support high-cost investments in post-harvest infrastructure. Drawing on our conversations with farmers, ranchers, farm support agencies, and food system advocates, our cohort explored three key opportunities to reduce Hawai'i's food import dependence and strengthen the resilience of the state's food system.



Strengthening biosecurity measures to manage the risks from invasive species is critical to protecting Hawai'i's economy, environment, and quality of life. While Hawai'i's agricultural industry generates \$674 million in annual farm sales,² the potential market is heavily impacted by invasive species. Invasive fruit flies alone cause \$300 million in lost revenue annually.³ Other high-impact invasive species harming agriculture include coconut rhinoceros beetles, little fire ants, and feral pigs.⁴ An estimated \$95 million annual investment towards a coordinated statewide biosecurity plan⁵ is needed to prevent higher-cost economic damages, which range between \$211 million and \$2 billion annually for a single uncontrolled invasive species.⁶

A SHARED ISSUE ACROSS AGRICULTURE

FOOD CROPS. The invasive coconut rhinoceros beetle (CRB) is one of the top threats to Hawai'i food crops today. Although CRB prefers coconut and oil palms, it will attack other important crops when preferred hosts are scarce, including banana, papaya, pineapple, taro, and sugarcane.^{7,8} On O'ahu's North Shore, Kahuku Farms is vigilantly monitoring hundreds of its açai palms for signs of CRB infestation. These palms are a valuable part of the farm's identity as the home of the first locally grown açai bowl.²

CATTLE RANCHING. The invasive two-lined spittlebug is one of the most significant threats to Hawai'i's cattle industry. Between 2019-2026, infested pastureland on Hawai'i Island more than doubled to 320,000 acres,^{10,11} where 74% of the state's cattle shipments originate.¹² As pasture quality declines, ranchers are spending thousands of dollars each year to reseed pastures,¹³ and many have reduced their herds, some by as much as 50%, directly impacting local livestock production.¹⁴

SUCCESS STORIES

The U.S. Department of War's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) program is an example of how federal defense funding can be leveraged to achieve biosecurity outcomes. Between 2006 and 2025, DoW and its Hawai'i partners have contributed \$206 million to REPI projects supporting six military installations in the state.¹⁵ These projects contribute to restoring healthy ecosystems while reducing habitats for invasive species to establish. For example, the REPI project at Kāko'o 'Oiwi is restoring *lo'i kalo* (irrigated taro terraces) while removing invasive grasses and mangroves, strengthening traditional landscapes and ecosystem health.^{16,17}

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Increase REPI appropriations and prioritize projects that simultaneously protect military readiness, control invasive species, and restore agricultural landscapes. This recommendation aligns with Governor Green's proposal to prioritize REPI investments towards expanded conservation lands.¹⁸ Based on REPI projects implemented in Hawai'i over the past seven years that incorporated invasive species removal and other land management activities, biosecurity efforts are expected to continue as a component of expanded REPI projects.



Hawai'i faces increasing threats from wildfires, flooding, drought, and severe storms that jeopardize local food production and increase the state's dependence on food imports. These disasters damage crops and farm infrastructure, increase farmers' operational costs, and reduce farm profitability. Geographic isolation and dependence on food imports may result in commercial food supplies lasting only five to seven days during major disruptions.¹⁹ As an island chain, disruptions to fuel and interisland transportation can quickly limit food access, particularly for communities outside of Honolulu.

A SHARED ISSUE ACROSS AGRICULTURE

FOOD CROPS. Self-reported data from the March 2026 Kona Low storms document damage to more than 600 farms and over \$40 million in agricultural losses,²⁰ while State estimates indicate impacts closer to 1,800 farms and more than \$50 million. The scale of need was reflected in over 1,600 applications to the State's Emergency Farmer Relief Program, of which only 333 received initial funding.²¹ These impacts are further compounded by the number of Hawai'i farmers without crop insurance, leaving them with limited financial protection and significant barriers to recovery after disasters.

CATTLE RANCHING. Drought has reduced pasture growth and water availability, and has forced ranchers to purchase costly imported feed or reduce herd sizes. Hawai'i Island rancher, Lani Petrie, shared in a Civil Beat article, "In the mainland, you can go to another region where they weren't in drought and buy replacement heifers. We can't do that here."²² Rebuilding herds may take years and impact beef supply and availability throughout the state. Furthermore, drought also increases wildfire risk and was a major contributor to the 2023 Maui wildfires which burned more than 6,300 acres of agricultural land, destroying grazing pasture, fencing, and water infrastructure.²³

SUCCESS STORIES

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS) programs, including EQIP and RCPP, are highly utilized in Hawai'i, helping farmers and ranchers adopt practices such as windbreaks, cover crops, and managed grazing to reduce risks from high winds, flooding, erosion, drought, and wildfire.²⁴ In partnership with regional Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Agriculture Stewardship Hawai'i reported serving 112 O'ahu farms across more than 5,300 acres and developed 29 conservation plans that strengthened agricultural resilience and protected local food production.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Provide increased funding for disaster prevention and disaster recovery through USDA NRCS conservation programs, including EQIP and RCPP, while maintaining strong support for USDA Disaster Assistance Programs. Together, these investments help producers reduce disaster risk, recover more quickly, and protect Hawai'i's long-term food security.



Hawai'i agricultural producers consistently identify inadequate post-harvest infrastructure—including washing, packing, cold storage, aggregation, and value-added processing facilities—as one of the greatest bottlenecks to business expansion.²⁵ ²⁶ Despite strong producer demand, the number of food manufacturing establishments in Hawai'i has declined since 2018,²⁷ as high capital costs, operational expenses, and limited economies of scale make these facilities financially difficult to develop and sustain.

A SHARED ISSUE ACROSS AGRICULTURE

FOOD CROPS. Producers often plant beyond contracted volumes to account for unpredictable yields and strict retail market quality and size standards. Produce that falls outside these standards often loses its market value and is discarded or composted, fed to livestock, or shared within the community. Limited access to cold storage and processing facilities prevents producers from capturing additional value from off-grade products, reducing farm revenue and the total amount of locally-grown food that reaches consumers.

CATTLE RANCHING. Although cattle is Hawai'i's dominant livestock commodity, declining herd sizes and strong demand in the continental U.S. have reduced the number of cattle available for local processing. Nearly 80% of Hawai'i's cattle shipments are exported to the mainland,²⁸ where favorable market conditions provide significant opportunities for local ranchers. While slaughter and processing capacity has expanded in recent years, post harvest infrastructure remains a constraint for some processors. Limited cold storage can restrict weekly processing capacity during peak harvest periods and reduce the industry's flexibility to respond as local cattle supply and market demand change.

SUCCESS STORIES

Food processing facilities within the Hawai'i Food and Product Innovation Network are successfully empowering entrepreneurs to develop value-added products with locally-grown ingredients. The Maui Food Innovation Center (MFIC) has provided training and technical assistance in food product development and marketing to hundreds of food entrepreneurs. Their program participation includes access to shared-use commercial kitchen space and an array of processing equipment. Former MFIC trainee and HI Spice hot sauce owner Justin Orr described the program's value, "I honestly don't know if I'd be where I am today without [MFIC]."²⁹

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Increase flexibility within federal grant programs to support the construction and expansion of shared-use cold storage, aggregation, and processing facilities that serve multiple producers. While many existing federal programs fund equipment purchases, they often limit funding for construction or facility improvements. Modern post-harvest infrastructure would support local small and mid-sized producers to reach larger and more stable markets by meeting industry standards for volume, food safety, packaging, and shipping.

REFERENCES

References are available at this [link](#) or the QR code below.

