



Hawai'i Agricultural Leadership Program



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.

ABOUT US



COHORT MEMBERS



MONTHS



AGRICULTURAL SITE VISITS



LEADERSHIP SEMINARS



WORKSHOP HOURS



AG NETWORK BUILDING



HAWAIIAN ISLANDS

Agriculture and Economic Priorities

Our cohort chose four priorities based on the Hawai'i Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) 2023-2027 and the aligning Agriculture and Food Systems Action Plan. These priorities are reinforced by personal experiences and stakeholder dialogue.

#1
PRIORITIZE
AGRICULTURAL LAND AFFORDABILITY & EQUITABLE WATER ACCESS

#2
ENHANCE
LOCAL AGRICULTURAL-RELATED FACILITIES & ACCESS

#3
INCREASE
AFFORDABLE AGRICULTURAL HOUSING

#4
EXPAND
"FARM TO STATE" PROGRAM AND ACCESSIBILITY & AFFORDABILITY PROGRAMS

Priority 1

Prioritize agricultural land affordability and equitable water access through land use and regulatory policies that promote pricing appropriate to agricultural activities and access to irrigation water.

Water

As the most isolated population center on earth, Hawai'i relies on its freshwater cycle. The original Hawaiian inhabitants revered water, seeing rivers and streams as the embodiment of the god Kāneikawaiola. The phrase "ola i ka wai" (water is life) underscores the islands' dependence on water. Water in Hawai'i is a public trust resource. Equitable agricultural water affordability and access is challenged by limited resources, aging infrastructure, conflicts between private landowners and local communities, population growth, tourism, and climate change.

Data:

- Hawai'i's annual rainfall varies significantly with topography, ranging from less than 10 inches in dry areas to over 400 inches in wet regions. Fog drip from native forests at higher altitudes plays a crucial role in recharging groundwater which is essential for mitigating potential impacts of future dry climate scenarios, invasive species, and development.
- In 2023 after the Maui fires, upcountry Maui, home to much of the island's agricultural land, declared a Stage 2 Water Shortage due to a 20% shortfall in water supply compared to demand. The U.S. Drought Monitor reports that Maui County has experienced the worst recent drought conditions in Hawai'i in recent years.
- Hawai'i's dams and reservoirs are vital for farmers, especially as climate change affects water affordability and availability. However, most reservoirs remain at restricted capacity due to financial challenges. This limits farmers' ability to capture and store water for irrigation. Of Hawai'i's 127 regulated dams, 99% have "high hazard potential" and are unsatisfactory. Many owners are unable to bring their dams and reservoirs to compliance due to cost, which can result in decommissioning.

On a federal level, there are several actions that could help Hawai'i's water access, including:

- **Waiving or reducing the financial match required for applicants applying for federal funding.** In Hawai'i, funding matches (often between 20-50% of the federal grant) prevent many agencies, producers and landowners from applying due to limited state budgets and private funds.
- **Providing additional funding through the Bureau of Reclamation's WaterSMART program for the full development of plans, including the Hawai'i Water Plan which encompasses the Agricultural Water Use and Development Plan (AWUDP).** This will be a long-term management plan that assesses state and private agricultural water use, supply, and irrigation water systems. As part of the AWUDP, Hawai'i's Division of Forestry and Wildlife (DOFAW) underscores the link between conservation and agriculture, emphasizing that forests, which draw rainfall, are vital "green infrastructure" needed to meet diversified agricultural water needs. Many aging water systems originate in state forest reserves, and DOFAW is working with other state agencies to implement a watershed cost-share in water leases. This will generate additional funds from water lessees to manage the forested watersheds that feed the water systems. DOFAW seeks to involve the Hawai'i Department of Agriculture (HDOA) in setting water rates, fees, and revenue use.

Cohort Story: GoFarm Kaua'i - *The Importance of Water Infrastructure*

In Kaua'i County, many farmers rely on outdated plantation infrastructure for water. In April 2024, severe flooding damaged the Lihu'e Ditch, leaving GoFarm Hawai'i and 12 other farms without water for 33 days. This forced them to improvise with catchment systems, home water sources, or trucked-in supplies. These challenges increased washing times, delayed transplanting, accelerated harvests, and raised production costs, undermining competitiveness against cheaper imports.

Priority 1 Continued

Prioritize agricultural land affordability and equitable water access through land use and regulatory policies that promote pricing appropriate to agricultural activities and access to irrigation water.

Land Affordability

Hawai'i's high land costs significantly hinder farming across the state. Small-scale and new farmers struggle to afford agricultural land due to high prices, limited availability, and competition from residential demand, landfills, and gentleman farms. Affordable land is often remote, which increases transportation costs and limits access to services, markets and housing. Farmers frequently pay retail rates for supplies while selling produce at wholesale prices. All of these expenses create high financial challenges, especially for new farmers, who face large upfront costs and years of effort to break even.

Data:

- In 2023, cropland rent in Hawai'i was the third highest in the nation, averaging \$295 per acre, higher than the overall U.S. average of \$155 per acre.
- The majority of Hawai'i's small farms earn less than \$10,000 in annual sales. 2023 USDA data shows that on average, U.S. cropland was \$5,460/acre with the Pacific region average at \$8,080. 2022 USDA data estimated the average market value of U.S. farmland with buildings at \$11,411/acre. At these rates, it would be difficult for farmers to afford land and other input costs.
- Recent examples of Hawai'i cropland purchases and prices include:
 - In 2024, developer Peter Savio's Ohana Farm Parcels range from \$75,000-\$110,000/acre.
 - In 2023, Hawaiian Host bought 4,000 acres for \$26M (\$6,500/ acre with assets).
 - In 2018, Mahi Pono purchased 41,000 acres for \$262M (\$6,097/acre).

Cohort Story - Kamehameha Schools: *An Agricultural Land Leasing Model*

Kamehameha Schools' (KS) Endowment Enterprises operates an agricultural leasing program in North and South Kona that supports committed commercial farmers with below-market lease rates to ensure stability, affordability, and residency. KS manages ~12,000 acres of agricultural-zoned land and offers around 700 leases ranging from 1-20 acres with lease terms up to 35 years. Nearly 89% of these leases include residential dwellings. This program highlights the potential for large landowners, showcasing the viability of maintaining productive agricultural lands while achieving blended returns.

Community Land Trusts

In a 2017 publication, The Kohala Center suggests that Hawai'i farming communities can explore Community Land Trusts (CLTs) to increase access to land and housing, while also building equity for participants. The collective purchase of lands and the use of agricultural conservation easements can be tools to maintain land affordability and avoid escalating market prices which can lead to higher purchase prices, lease rates and real property taxes. CLTs usually hold permanent ownership of the land and lease it to others who own improvements on it, including residential homes and agricultural operations. A CLT can opt to separate land and housing ownership in order to promote affordability and stabilize housing costs by preventing rising prices like in a fee-simple ownership system.

Targeted federal funding for the following efforts would promote land affordability in Hawai'i:

- **Investment in CLTs to support capacity building programs, technical assistance, supplemental funding for easement purchases, and site improvements, including for infrastructure to support production and housing.**
- **Investment in HDOA to support infrastructure development and construction on its leasehold properties including aging Agricultural Parks, as well as other lands in its portfolio for new road access, waterlines, and fencing to address feral animals and theft.**

Priority 2

Increase local agricultural-related facilities and access including processing plants, slaughterhouses, commercial kitchens, storage, and distribution.

A thriving agricultural industry in Hawai'i will depend on the development of local facilities, including processing plants, slaughterhouses, commercial kitchens, and storage and distribution centers. Expanding these agricultural-related facilities and improving access will enable agribusinesses to aggregate, process, and add value to Hawai'i-grown products. This will strengthen businesses, reduce import dependence, and keep money circulating within the local economy. Given that 85-90% of Hawai'i's food is imported, there is a critical need to increase local food production to support food security and boost resiliency in the event of a natural disaster or pandemic. Replacing just 10% of food imports would retain \$314M in Hawai'i's economy, potentially creating \$50M in earnings for farmers and up to 2,300 jobs. The Aloha+ Challenge, one of many initiatives to improve food security, aims to double local food production by 2030. As these efforts materialize, so will the need for more agricultural-related facilities.

Data:

- Grant writing is critical for increasing agricultural-related facilities and access. Investments in grant writing of \$1.4M by Ulupono Initiative and The Kohala Center have yielded \$140M in returns, including \$40M from the USDA's Partnerships for Climate Smart Commodities and \$30M from USDA's Regional Food Business Center.
- Participants in the 2022 O'ahu CEDS Agriculture and Food Systems Focus Group noted major infrastructure gaps, including that farmers and entrepreneurs need more agribusiness facilities and support. Recent investments include the Wahiawā Valued-Added Product Development Center (\$21.6M; 33,000 sq. ft.) and the Maui Food Innovation Center (\$8.5M; 4,000 sq. ft.), but more facilities are needed to meet the growing need.

Access to affordable slaughter facilities is a major hurdle for providing local protein. Cattle is Hawai'i's third most valuable commodity, yet locally processed meat accounts for only 6% of beef consumption. Increasing the number and distribution of slaughterhouse facilities could bring financial benefits to ranchers given the demand for grass-fed beef at premium prices. Slaughterhouses could also uplift the local venison market since invasive axis deer must be hunted to reduce their effects on the landscape.

Cohort Story: Kualoa Ranch - *A Potential Market*

Until 2021, Kualoa Ranch was able to raise lamb, slaughter it, and sell it. However, that year, O'ahu's only USDA slaughtering facility decided to put an end to slaughtering sheep. This has made it nearly impossible to butcher sheep, essentially eliminating this scalable industry (compared to other livestock operations). As of 2022, there were over 21,500 sheep on 457 local farms in Hawai'i, but the demand for local sheep remains unmet due to a lack of infrastructure and access.

Federal actions that could help increase Hawai'i's agricultural-related facilities and access include:

- **Continued federal funding for capacity building and technical assistance to ensure that commercial kitchens, food hubs, distribution networks and systems will be able to grow into strong self-sustaining business models without future government subsidies.**
- **Increased support for rural infrastructure projects, including significant investments in value-added facilities such as macadamia nut processing plants and slaughterhouses. These facilities will enable small farmers, ranchers, and producers to remain competitive. Furthermore, in order to meet demand, more USDA inspectors are needed across the islands, specifically for new and existing slaughterhouse facilities.**

Priority 3

Increase affordable agricultural housing to reduce the cost of living for the agricultural workforce.

The lack of affordable agricultural housing is a major obstacle for farmers in Hawai'i. High rental costs and low financial rewards make farming less appealing to potential farmers and the lack of housing contributes to a shortage of agricultural workers across the state. Historically, providing housing for farm workers was effective in attracting and retaining long-term employees. Rising housing costs for Hawai'i residents, including agricultural producers and workers, are a result of a growing population, high demand for affordable rental units, and an increase rentals being used as vacation properties.

To address the agricultural housing shortage in Hawai'i, it is critical that:

- **USDA Rural Development programs continue to receive funding for loan, cost-sharing and rehabilitation options to support both producer and agricultural worker housing.**
- **There is more federal support for farm workers through the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Priorities include financial and technical support for energy efficiency, compliant wastewater and drinking water systems, and possible rental assistance programs.**
- **There is increased federal grant funding to cover higher average costs, as well as a broader definition of rural communities that reflects the state's diverse geography beyond Census Designated Places.**

Data:

- Nearly 22,000 people live in agricultural households in Hawai'i.
- Hawai'i's 2022 median rent was \$1,868 - the highest in the U.S. and \$600 above the average.
- 41% of Hawai'i residents are classified as ALICE (asset-limited, income-constrained, employed), with an additional 12% living below the Federal Poverty Line. As of 2023, to meet Hawai'i's ALICE Survival Budget, individuals needed to earn hourly wages of \$18.46 for a single adult, \$20.53 for a single senior, and \$42.91 (\$104,052 annually) for a family of four.
- In 2023, the USDA reported that the gross wage rate for a Hawai'i agricultural worker was \$20.83/hour which equates to \$43,326 annually. This wage barely surpasses the ALICE Survival Budget for a single adult and falls short if both adults in a family of four were earning an average agricultural worker's rate.

Agritourism

It is important to note that many farmers support the use of agricultural lands for agritourism, such as properly regulated bed and breakfast operations, farm tours and events. Agritourism can provide supplementary income for current farmers and makes farming a more viable option for aspiring, new farmers. Successful models from the continental U.S. show that this can subsidize farming operations.

Cohort Story: Hawai'i Agricultural Research Center - An Agricultural Housing Model

Stevie Whalen, Executive Director of the Hawai'i Agriculture Research Center (HARC), provides an inspiring example for affordable agricultural housing. When Campbell Estate offered Kunia Camp to HARC, the former Del Monte agricultural housing, the HARC board accepted. HARC worked with the Rural Community Assistance Corporation to obtain low income housing tax credits and used USDA Loan Program 514 and Subsidy Program 516 funding to renovate, construct, and subsequently subsidize 82 units that were built nearly 80 years ago. HARC reflected the Hawai'i sugar industry's practice of providing housing, utilities, and medical care for its workers. HARC created two organizations: Kunia Village Title Holding Corporation, a for-profit tax exempt 501(c)(2), to hold the asset and Kunia Village Development Corporation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, to develop the property. It's goal is to ensure the land remains dedicated to, and used primarily for, agriculture.

Priority 4

Expand the “Farm to State” program as well as food accessibility and affordability programs

“Farm to State” and accessibility and affordability programs aim to increase access to fresh, nutritious foods for low-income households, while also prioritizing local agricultural products in government and institutional procurement. A robust “Farm to State” program is essential for the economic viability of farming in the islands. Institutional procurement by the Hawai‘i Department of Education (HDOE) and other agencies can generate significant demand, benefiting Hawai‘i’s agricultural producers and consumers. If the HDOE reached the mandated 30% local meat and produce purchasing benchmark, there would be an annual demand of \$15-\$20M for local farmers. Despite widespread support for purchasing locally, alternatives are still often chosen due to specific wording in the contracts that prioritize low cost instead of the advantages of fresh produce, dairy, and other products.

Funding programs like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), DA BUX, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) serve as economic multipliers. Through Hawai‘i’s DA BUX program, SNAP recipients are able to double their purchasing power for fresh, local produce. This supports low-income families and farmers, fostering a healthier, more sustainable food system. These types of programs effectively become productive subsidies for both producers and underserved community members with unmet financial and health needs.

Data:

- In 2024, Hawai‘i lawmakers secured \$1.5M annually for DA BUX matched by \$1.5M in federal funds. This created a \$3M annual budget, a significant win for producers and consumers.
- USDA estimates show that every dollar in SNAP creates \$0.54 in economic activity. Roughly 170,000 Hawai‘i residents drew down over \$900M in federal SNAP funds in 2022 which (with the economic multiplier) generated roughly \$1.4B investment in the local food system.
- The Department of Housing and Human Services is deploying the “Food Is Medicine” subsidy program to combat diet-related illnesses with produce prescriptions. Local organizations are readily adopting this concept including the Hawai‘i Good Food Alliance, Wai‘anae Coast Comprehensive Health Center, Waimānalo Health Center, and Kaua‘i’s North Shore Pharmacy.

Cohort Story: Meadow Gold - *Prioritizing “Local” First*

In a recent school milk bid, the HDOE did not prioritize local milk, which forced Meadow Gold to compete with mainland producers on price alone. As a result, Meadow Gold had to redirect its milk to retail channels, undermining the “Farm to School” initiative’s goal of sourcing 30% of food locally by 2030. This decision hurt local producers and prevented students from receiving fresh, local milk.

Cohort Story: Farm Link Hawai‘i - *Equitable Food Access for Families*

In February 2024, Farm Link partnered with the Waimānalo Health Center WIC ‘Ohana Makeke, a pop-up produce market funded by a Department of Health Equity Grant and the Hawai‘i Public Health Institute. This event provided \$30 worth of fresh, locally-grown produce to active WIC families and supported over twenty local farms and four Food Hubs. As a DA Bux partner, Farm Link offered 50% off produce for SNAP transactions. Serving as a local food hub, Farm Link sourced a variety of items including local poi, ‘uala, and bok choy, totaling 12,500 pounds of produce.

Continued federal and state support and expansion of these productive subsidies will ensure broad access to nutritious, local foods, while simultaneously supporting farmers and investing in the Hawai‘i economy.

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