Agriculture in Hawai'i at the Crossroads

It's Decision Time for Hawaii's Sustainable Future

by Jack Kelly

(Editor's note - In this comprehensive piece, South Kona activist, farmer and environmentalist Jack Kelly, a regular contributor to the Hawai'i Island Journal, takes a hard look at land-use issues and new agricultural methods that threaten to overwhelm family farms in Hawai'i. Kelly calls for awareness, and action, to save the state's farmlands, and farmers.)

I put the harness over my head and set the basket below my belly, then pick up my stick off the ground. Reaching up with the stick, I grip the vertical branch and pull it down in front of my basket. My fingers start working vigorously down the branch, exerting the right amount of pressure on the cherries to pop them off. A steady rhythm of cherries falling into the fiberglass basket develops as I move through this tree and on to the next.

The morning light dances on the leaves and the brightly colored coffee beans, a sparkling array of reds and yellows, golds and greens. A cool breeze moves by, coming from makai, and I pause to glance at the crystal blue oceanscape. "Lucky we live Hawai'i," I muse to myself.

Later it will get hot and that heat will initiate an on-shore breeze, pushing moisture from the ocean up the slope of Mauna Loa. Dark clouds build, and the field gets dark, quiet. Then the rain comes - soft the first time and then harder the next - a cool blessing from the sky. Grab the raincoat in anticipation and keep going. Then, a good hard downpour for 20 minutes or so. The cherries, wet now, fly off the tree. And then it stops and the sun peeks out from beneath the clouds, its golden rays reflecting the clouds and bouncing back to the sea. Another day on the farm.

Hard to imagine a more perfect setting, working your own farm in paradise, bringing in a crop you and your community feel proud of. Participating in an activity that, at its roots, affords man a feeling of independence and self-sustainability.

A dying breed; the family farmer.

Only one percent of the population in the United States can call themselves farmers. That makes farming a pretty unique occupation.

And farmland is disappearing at an astounding rate. More than a million acres of farmland is lost to development each year, according to the USDA's National Resources Inventory. But the character of rural America was changed long ago in the
time of the Great Depression, when farmers went broke and banks took over all the lands.
It was the era of Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath, when proud men became homeless, landless, overnight and forever, farm workers rather than farm owners. And the economy of life in the country was drastically altered as the huge corporate farms took hold.

In Hawai'i, the dispossession of farmers began with the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom and the resulting loss of land base for Hawaiians. Today, rapid development in Hawai'i threatens agricultural lands and districts on all the islands. With the demise of the hundred-year-old sugar industry, thousands of acres of former sugar lands are now open to changing uses.

Governor Linda Lingle is touting the need for reclassifying huge amounts of Ag lands for subdivision development. "If you restrain the amount of available land to build houses, you drive up the cost of land that is available," Lingle told Bruce Dunford of the AP in late September.

But there are a lot of farmers out there in Hawai'i Nei that think otherwise.
As of the year 2000, there were more than 5,500 farms in Hawai'i. In 1954, there were less than 3,700 such farms. Today, we grow more than 40 crops commercially. That's compared to only 28 fruit and vegetables grown commercially in 1954.

At the same time, the courts are affirming, as in the East Maui water and Waiahole cases, that traditional riparian uses of traditional waterways be restored to native farmers. Water is being returned to the land and the courts themselves have found that nature herself has a right to have running water flow through.

Diversified markets are improving for small farmers in Hawai'i and with a little impetus could flourish. In a state that imports more than 90 percent of its fresh produce, "food safety" has to be an important issue.

Any interruption of container service to Hawai'i will cause instant food shortages under the present system.
With so much available agricultural land, a shift to local production would provide an economic boon to the state - one that starts from the ground up. The same opportunity that could fuel development of these lands could instead serve as a base for a revival of traditional 'ohana-based agricultural practice.

**Agrarianism vs. Agricultural Industrialism**
The agricultural revolution with all its promise to feed the world through better chemistry has imploded upon itself.
Throughout the world, the widespread use of pesticides, herbicides and synthetic fertilizers has resulted in well-documented damage to the environment in terms of water, air and food pollution. This chemical abuse drains the vitality of the land and crop yields are falling.

Now comes the new wave of biotechnology - heralded as the answer to the problems already created by misuse of technology - and, according to a growing number of concerned scientists and farmers, it threatens even more environmental and social havoc.

Miguel Altieri, Ph.D., has taught for ten years at the University of California at Berkeley's College of Natural Resources and is the author of Agroecology: The Science of Sustainable Agriculture.
"It is clear then," he writes, "that the first wave of environmental problems is deeply rooted in the prevalent socioeconomic system which promotes monocultures and the use of high input technologies and agricultural practices that lead to the degradation of natural resources. This is particularly true today where the economic and political domination of the rural development agenda by agribusiness has thrived at the expense of the interests of farm workers, small family farms, rural communities, the
general public, wildlife, and the environment. It is ironic than the biotech revolution in agriculture is being promoted by the same corporate interests that championed the first wave of chemically based agriculture.

"One of the primary results - and one of the primary needs - of industrialism is the separation of people and places and products from their histories," writes Wendell Berry. "To the extent that we participate in the industrial economy, we do not know the histories of our families or our habitats or of our meals."

Wendell Berry is considered one of America's greatest living men of letters, having achieved recognition as a poet, novelist, and writer of non-fiction. He's also a farmer.

"In this condition, we have many commodities, but little satisfaction," says Berry. "If the industrial economy is not correctable within or by its own terms, then obviously what is required for correction is a countervailing economic idea."

The answer is in an idea Berry calls "agrarianism." "The fundamental difference between industrialism and agrarianism is whereas industrialism is a way of thought based on monetary capital and technology, agrarianism is a way of thought based on land."

The center of an agrarian economy is the household and the function of that economy is to live as much as possible off of the farm. Fishing, hunting and gathering are all sustenance activities that agrarian cultures share in order to achieve their sustainability goals.

"These activities bind people to their local landscape by close, complex interest and economic ties," says Berry. "The industrial economy alienates people from the native landscape precisely by breaking these direct practical ties and introducing distant dependencies."

"Agrarianism is a culture at the same time it is an economy. Industrialism is an economy before it is a culture. Industrial culture is an accidental by-product of the ubiquitous effort to sell unnecessary products for more than they are worth," he says.

Of course, this is no news to Hawaiians dispossessed from their lands by the sugar barons in the mid 1800s. Dispossession from the land. many Hawaiians feel, stands today as the number one obstacle to the resurgence of the Hawaiian culture. "Getting back to the land, knowing the ways of ku 'aina, this is what the children must do," says kupuna Aunty Pele Hanoa from Ka'u. "Young people today are becoming so urbanized; they forget what it is to be Hawaiian. To be Hawaiian is to be from and of the land."

In the early 1800s, historian Fornander described the fields of Kona as "one of the agricultural wonders of the world." The terraced hillside contained abundant crops that sustained many thousands of Hawaiians. Similar agricultural projects flourished on all the islands.

With the advent of sugar, many of these productive lands that had been farmed in harmony with the forest and ocean waters were drastically altered by the massive monocropping and highly chemical methods employed by the sugar companies. The sugar companies diverted the water and the taro loi dried up. Hawaiians had to move on.

**What Mandate is the State Following?**

The delegates to Hawaii’s 1978 Constitutional Convention inserted provisions that created a mandate to protect and conserve important ag lands.

But the state seems to be marching to a different drummer. Large agribusiness has been generating the drumbeat for a long time. Help for small farmers - in the form of land preservation, market research, and legislation that could make local producers competitive with mainland producers - is virtually nonexistent, while the Department
of Agriculture and the University promote large-scale development of genetically modified products.

The Lingle administration's stated goal of reducing the amount of land set aside for agriculture runs counter to the planning trends being developed in other locales that are now beginning to realize the value of the farmland that has been lost. Communities are scrambling to save what little is left as farms and farmers disappear at a rapid clip. On the mainland, awareness of the importance of preserving farmland and farming communities is growing exponentially. In 1979, about the same time as Hawaii's "Con Con," the California legislature created the Small Farm Program that was intended to enhance the viability of small- and moderate-scale agricultural producers. The program strives to stimulate research and extension education in production systems, marketing, and farm management.

The Small Farm Program is a University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources statewide program. DANR addresses California's concerns in the general areas of agriculture, natural resources, human and community development, and public policy.

The typical clientele operate small scale, family owned or managed farms. They often have limited resources and represent many different cultures and types of operations. This program keys in on the overall health of the community driven by sustainable practice.

The American Farmland Trust consults with communities on methods they can use to save farmland. Agricultural easement programs that serve to 'bank lands' for future use by purchasing those easements from private landowners are a prime example of proactive protection of agricultural areas.

As of July 2002, 24 states had authorized state-level Purchase of Agricultural Easement programs. Since 1995, for example, California has spent $16 million to protect 13,480 acres of farmland.

**GM Crops : Perpetuating the Agribusiness Model**

Besides Gov. Lingle's push to develop Ag lands into housing developments and golf courses, probably the most dangerous threat to the grassroots effort to revive sustainable community agriculture in Hawai'i is the proliferation of GM (genetically modified) crops and test plots on Hawaiian soil.

Large GM producers like Monsanto and Pioneer HI Bred operate freely in Hawai'i and under the protection of our state government. Since 1968 when the University of Hawaii's College of Tropical Agriculture partnered with Illinois Foundation Seed and Cornnuts, Inc. to establish Molokai Seed Service, the presence of GM test plots has flourished. In 1968, Trojan Seed Company established a corn research farm in Kihei, Maui, that is now run by Monsanto. Pioneer HI-Bred International, another GM industry giant established its first acreage the same year in Hawai'i in West Kauai.

Rumors abound on Hawai'i Island today that GM industry companies are negotiating with large landowners Kamehameha Schools and C. Brewer to lease large acreages for "biopharming" operations.

Statewide, the public is unaware of just how many GM-crop acres are in production, or where those test plots are located - and the reason for that is the State Department of Agriculture's refusal to divulge that information. That refusal has led to EarthJustice attorney Isaac Moriwake's filing of a complaint to force public disclosure of any biotechnology projects in Hawai'i. Moriwake's client is the Center for Food Safety, a Washington D.C. public interest group doggedly
monitoring the abuses of the GM movement.

"The shroud of secrecy surrounding biopharming is unacceptable," said Joseph Mendelson, CFS's legal director. "The public has the right to know about these potentially harmful substances being grown in our backyard. The state has become a willful accomplice in depriving the people of Hawai'i of this right."

The term "biopharming" has been coined to describe the producing of "biopharmaceutical " food crops genetically engineered to producer a wide range of industrial chemicals and drugs, including contraceptives, hormones, vaccines, and other potent, biologically active substances.

The State Public Records Law, the Uniform Information Practices Act of 1988, requires all records with few exceptions to be made available to the public. The Department of Agriculture (DOA) claims that the documents are protected from disclosure under federal law because they contain "confidential business information."

"DOA's reasoning is transparent," said Moriwake. "USDA's own regulations require it to furnish documents to DOA and that the federal laws expressly apply only to federal agencies and do not affect DOA's own, independent duties of disclosure under state law." If DOA felt it could not disclose certain information, he added, "it is required under UIPA to redact the information before issuing the documents, rather than denying all access."

The Kona coffee industry has reacted to reports of three independent GM projects related to coffee by achieving a County Council resolution to ban the introduction of any GM test plants into Kona. The County Council initiated the resolution last year but coffee farmers still don't feel protected.

"The DOA will tell us certain things but they withhold information that might be critical," says Gus Brockson, coffee farmer and coordinator of the Kona Farmers Alliance.

"We know there are three different tests being conducted; one to create a variety that is resistant to nematode root rot; one trying to create a decaf coffee tree; and one that will ripen all at once when sprayed with a ripening agent."

Brockson was one of several Kona farmers representing their respective groups at a "talk story" in Kainiliu in September with Department of Ag officials, including director Sandra Kunimoto.

"They say there are not test plots on this island but testing is still being conducted in a lab at the university in Hilo. Brother, one mistake, and we could lose our European market. The DOA knows that we, the small farmers as a group, are against genetic manipulation of our Kona Coffee but, instead of listening to us, they are still trying to convince us it's a good thing. The secrecy about the whole thing is alarming," said Brockson.

Martha Crouch, Ph.D., is recently retired from 20 years of teaching at Indiana University where she worked extensively with genetic modification. She was involved in the development of canola that is used to make the cooking oil of the same name. She gave up that work to focus actively in educating the public about the dangers of GM foods.

She found that many in the Hawai'i question how deep the connection between the University of Hawai'i and pro-GM corporations like Monsanto and Pioneer Hi-Bred are.

According to Dr. Crouch, "It's not so much that the schools are tied to the corporations. The government controls what type of research is done because they hold the purse strings. Scientists want and need to work. It's the government that is tied to the big multi-nationals and therefore research is driven by the political agenda that is dominant. It's been that way since the initial forming of granting agencies. Small farmers and community-based initiatives have little voice in the big
picture."
But in Hawai'i, with its rich history and ongoing vitality of small family farms, farmers are intent on making sure that their voices are heard. The legislature is listening, as evidenced by the July 8, 2003 override of Gov. Lingle's veto of SB 255, a unanimously-passed bill intended to bolster the state land-use law addressing agricultural land protections.
The courts are listening, as is evidenced by the recent decisions in the Hokulia case in Kona, where state laws regarding the use of agricultural lands were upheld, and the East Maui water lease case, where native Hawaiian taro farmers won a battle to have their needs considered by the state when decisions are made about water allocations.
Whether the executive branch of our state, currently careening along the path of supporting developers and big agribusiness at the expense of our state's small farmers and treasured agricultural heritage, will follow the lead of the legislative and judicial branches will become known in the coming months and years.
In the meantime, the one percent, those hard-working farmers that produce the vitamin-packed fresh fruits and vegetables that grace our tables and the rich-tasting coffee that fills our morning mugs, are fervently hoping that all of us, including the Lingle administration, will listen to their collective voices and take action before it's too late.