Partners Pursue Common Goal

by Kathleen Vickers

_Ua mau ke ea o ka aina i ka pono._
The life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness.

These words — the motto of the Kingdom of Hawaii, now our state motto — acknowledge that a responsible society sustains its land and is sustained by it. To meet this responsibility, we must create the conditions under which agriculture can thrive as an integral part of Hawaii’s priorities and economy.

In 1978, the Hawaii Constitutional Convention recognized the importance of preserving farmland when it added Article XI, Section 3 to the Hawaii State Constitution: “The State shall conserve and protect agricultural lands, promote diversified agriculture, increase agricultural self-sufficiency and assure the availability of agriculturally suitable lands. The legislature shall provide standards and criteria to accomplish the foregoing.” Twenty-five years later, this mandate remains unfulfilled, and unresolved issues continue to hamper the establishment of agricultural land use standards and criteria.

A Changing Landscape

Hawaii’s story is rooted in agriculture. The first Hawaiians farmed the land and sea, conserving the Islands’ resources through generations of careful stewardship. With the advent of plantation agriculture, Hawaii’s rural economy shifted toward large-scale production of sugarcane and pineapple, but during the past four decades, the acreage in sugarcane and pineapple has declined by almost 80%.

Today, smaller entrepreneurial farms that cultivate a variety of crops are driving agriculture’s continued vitality. Diversified agriculture (crops other than sugarcane and pineapple) has more than quadrupled its acreage since 1961.

In 2002, farm sales for diversified crops reached a record level, $370.9 million, and accounted for almost 70% of Hawaii’s total farm revenues. The value of diversified agriculture and its associated products has more than doubled in the past 20 years.

As the shift from plantation agriculture to diversified agriculture accelerates, we must adapt our policies and infrastructure to support this transition. The issues that affect diversified agriculture – land, and water resources, labor and farm management, environmental conservation, and marketing – are complex and interdependent. The state can nurture its new agriculture and help our agribusinesses address these important concerns by designing and implementing public policies that align with the industry’s needs.

One such need is land. If diversified agriculture is to continue growing, Hawaii must address the question of how best to conserve and protect this resource.

Conserving Agricultural Land

The fate of Hawaii’s farmland is influenced by the state’s unique agricultural history. A small number of landholders own most of Hawaii’s lands. Most Hawaii farmers do not own land they farm. Many tenant farmers have short leases and do not know whether these will be extended, which creates uncertainty and risk.

Landholders, too, are confronted with thorny questions. Much of Hawaii’s arable land is also desirable real estate for residential development. The state’s growing population, which increased
by 9.3% from 1990 to 2000, creates demand for new housing. The owners of Hawaii’s agricultural lands have the right to expect reasonable return on their assets. At the same time, the conversion of productive lands to non-agricultural use shrinks the acreage available for farming and can set the stage for conflict between farmers and neighboring residents who may be unaccustomed to the dust, noise, and odors that are part of agriculture.

Finding common ground on which all stakeholders can agree has been difficult.

The State Land Use Commission classifies 95% of Hawaii’s total acreage as belonging to either conservation or agriculture land use districts, with the remaining 5% designated for rural or urban development. Land use policy must tackle important questions: Is the current land use pattern right for Hawaii? Which lands are best for agriculture? Which are best for development of urban or rural communities? How can we balance the protection of agricultural lands against the need for housing?

The Agriculture Working Group
In response to legislative efforts to meet the mandate of Article XI, Section 3 of the Hawaii State Constitution, representatives from the farming and agribusiness community, landowners, public agencies, and citizens’ organizations have formed the Agriculture Working Group (AWG) to help promote Hawaii’s diversified agriculture and increase our agricultural self-sufficiency. This broadly constituted group has an open membership and meets regularly to advance Hawaii agriculture by pursuing the conservation and protection of agricultural lands. The ground rules of the AWG emphasize active listening and mutual respect. During its 2003 session, the Hawaii State Legislature passed HCR 157, which formally acknowledged the efforts of the AWG to address the constitutional mandate to conserve and protect agricultural lands.

Within the AWG, subcommittees address specific aspects of agriculture policy, including land use modeling and tools, mapping of agricultural lands, criteria and quantification of agricultural lands, issues of agricultural economic feasibility, and jurisdictional matters. Topics currently being include the role of counties in implementing studied state statutes that promote conservation and protection of agricultural lands, approaches to rating the quality of agricultural lands, and methods for assessing current and potential land uses. An archive of the AWG’s meetings and reports can be found on-line at www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/awg/.

The AWG and its subcommittees met throughout 2003 to formulate concepts that will be included in legislation to be introduced in the 2004 session. The legislative package is expected to contain two major components that are directly linked: a process for identifying important agricultural lands (IAL) and incentives to support long-term agricultural viability. The land identification process might include the establishment by the Legislature of standards and criteria for designating IAL and the appropriate involvement of state and county agencies in the implementation of those standards and criteria. Incentives under discussion include tax credits, agricultural enterprise zones, agricultural easements, purchase or transfer of development rights, rewards for granting long-term leases, agricultural viability programs, and priority access to water or infrastructure.

Future Directions
A strong agricultural sector benefits all Hawaii residents. Profitable farming has the potential to double the value of the state’s agricultural output, currently $2.4 billion, within five years. Agriculture contributes to our economy and quality of life in other ways as well, preserving the open space that Hawaii’s residents and visitors value, recharging the aquifers that provide our drinking water, and lessening our dependence on imported food. Continued expansion of diversified agriculture can broaden and strengthen Hawaii’s economic base, complement tourism, increase our food security, and support rural communities. Equitable policies that conserve and protect agricultural lands are one key to realizing these goals. In cooperation with state and county policymakers, landowners, farmers, and interested non-governmental organizations, the
AWG is working toward a land use agenda that can meet diverse stakeholder needs and make 2004 the year that Hawaii’s constitutional assurances to agriculture take root.

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