

JAN 25 2023

A BILL FOR AN ACT

RELATING TO TARO LANDS.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF HAWAII:

1 SECTION 1. The legislature finds that the last three years
2 of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic have demonstrated the
3 fragile nature of Hawaii's food security, as well as the
4 strength and resilience of the taro farming community. In the
5 midst of pandemic isolation, commercial and subsistence taro
6 farmers contributed tens of thousands of pounds of healthy,
7 staple starch food (taro and poi) and tens of thousands of huli
8 (taro planting material), and taught hundreds of families to
9 grow their own food and pound their own poi, uplifting their
10 well-being and bringing people closer together. Demand for
11 kalo, the Hawaiian word for taro, and poi direct from farmers
12 and ku`i `ai practitioners (hand pounded poi makers) far
13 outweighs production, despite the increase in reported acreage
14 from three hundred forty to four hundred eighteen between 2015
15 and 2021, with an estimated equal number of acres not captured
16 by survey. The State continues to import more than two million
17 pounds of taro annually. In its 2010 report to the legislature,



1 and again in 2015, the taro security and purity task force found
2 "no logical reason why we should continue to import any type of
3 taro to meet local needs" in Hawaii when we have the desire,
4 land, and water to do so ourselves. Interest in planting kalo
5 at a subsistence and small-scale commercial level is at its
6 highest since the 1970s, driven by a revaluing of priorities
7 since COVID. Among those who desire to raise kalo for local
8 consumption, access to water and affordable land present the
9 biggest challenges. The State holds numerous lands within its
10 jurisdiction that were former taro lands, or are capable of
11 becoming wet or dry taro-producing lands, on all islands. The
12 taro task force found that lease rates for department of land
13 and natural resource lands were inconsistent, and in some cases
14 unduly expensive due to the influence of the value of adjacent
15 developed lands, thereby making the land unaffordable to
16 existing or future taro farmers. They also found that while
17 general agricultural leases on public lands were typically below
18 \$100 per acre per year, taro lands averaged \$300 per acre and
19 were as high as \$2,000 per acre per year when adjacent to highly
20 valued residential properties or conservation land. In general,
21 taro farming lands appear to have higher lease rates among state



1 agencies than leases for other agricultural uses. The high cost
2 of leases makes critical long-term fallow and regenerative
3 agricultural practices that improve soil health unaffordable.
4 In addition, long-term leases require a competitive bid process
5 that disadvantages and disenfranchises taro farmers. Taro
6 farming is a practice learned on-farm, through family or
7 mentors, and by example. The task force also found farmland
8 lease criteria under the department of agriculture required
9 specific education levels, financial status, or both that
10 prevented taro farmers from qualifying for leases, particularly
11 young farmers.

12 The purpose of this Act is to improve access to taro
13 growing lands and leases, and opportunities for local taro
14 self-sufficiency, by requiring the department of land and
15 natural resources and department of agriculture to reevaluate
16 their inventory of lands for potential taro-growing lands,
17 develop more affordable and reasonable lease rent rates and
18 long-term lease strategies, establish accessible criteria for
19 qualifying taro farmers, and, in partnership with taro farmers,
20 facilitate the expansion of taro production and local food
21 self-sufficiency and security.



1 SECTION 2. By January 1, 2025, the department of land and
2 natural resources and department of agriculture shall:

3 (1) Reevaluate agency land inventory for taro-growing
4 lands and, using local knowledge of the location of
5 historic wet taro-cultivated areas and resources
6 available through the office of Hawaiian affairs,
7 designate these lands, or portions of lands as
8 available only and specifically for commercial,
9 subsistence, or education-based taro production;

10 (2) Prioritize allocation of leases for taro lands either
11 month-to-month or long-term in descending order as
12 follows:

- 13 (A) Taro farmers from the immediate area;
- 14 (B) Taro farmers from within the ahupua`a where the
15 taro lands are located;
- 16 (C) Taro farmers from outside the ahupua`a and on the
17 same island where the taro lands are located;
- 18 (D) Nonprofit organizations on the same island where
19 growing taro is a demonstrated essential part of
20 their work; and
- 21 (E) Taro farmers from another island;



1 (3) Set a cap on lease rents for taro lands at not more
 2 than \$100 per acre, regardless of adjacent land
 3 values;

4 (4) Review existing lease mechanisms and qualifying
 5 criteria under the department of land and natural
 6 resources and the department of agriculture and
 7 develop a consistent and accessible criteria for taro
 8 farmers to qualify for taro land leases based on the
 9 recommendations of the taro task force; and

10 (5) Provide public access to information, including:

11 (A) Taro land inventories;

12 (B) Opportunities for leases of these lands;

13 (C) Qualifying criteria and costs for taro farm
 14 leases; and

15 (D) A streamlined application process.

16 SECTION 3. The department of land and natural resources
 17 and department of agriculture shall submit reports to the
 18 legislature no later than twenty days prior to the convening of
 19 the regular sessions of 2024, 2026, 2028, 2030, and 2032 on the
 20 status of each action required by this Act, including the status



1 of the reclassification of taro lands, adjustments to lease
2 rents, and modifications to lease qualification criteria.

3 SECTION 4. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2023;
4 provided that this Act shall be repealed on June 30, 2032.

5

INTRODUCED BY: _____

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S.B. NO. 1500

Report Title:

Agriculture; Affordable Taro Lands

Description:

Requires the Department of Land and Natural Resources and the Department of Agriculture to work with taro farmers to identify taro lands, adjust lease rents, and modify lease qualification criteria. Sunsets after 10 years.

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