

Stimulus money means jobs, watershed restoration

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What can \$2.69 million in federal stimulus money buy?

For the Pelekane Bay watershed restoration project, it means six fence builders and six nursery workers, as well as a field operations leader and a field technician working to build miles of fencing, transplant thousands of native plant species and weed out invasive species.

It's a job for a laid-off construction worker, steady employment for a long-time plumber and career inspiration for a recent high school graduate excited about conservation. The program, run through The Kohala Center's Kohala Watershed Partnership, also means a job for a laid-off relative, and the encouraging of partnership volunteers to apply for the short-term, full-time jobs.

The federal money generates business for Waimea mechanics who repair the project's used four-wheel drive vehicles. The money also goes toward buying used four-wheel drive vehicles to reach the job sites and purchasing soil, nursery and building supplies from businesses in Kawaihae, Waimea, Hilo and Puna.

The Kohala Watershed Partnership was selected to receive American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds in June, for work on the Pelekane Bay watershed project. Long-planned, the restoration work involves fencing several hundred acres in the watershed to keep out feral goats, sheep and other ungulates that eat native plants and trample plant habitat. Decades of rampant invasive species growth has resulted in significant amounts of sediment settling in Pelekane Bay, a bay once teeming with fish, according to long-time area residents. The work began in August and the crews have until December to complete it, giving them 18 months from the funding award to completion.

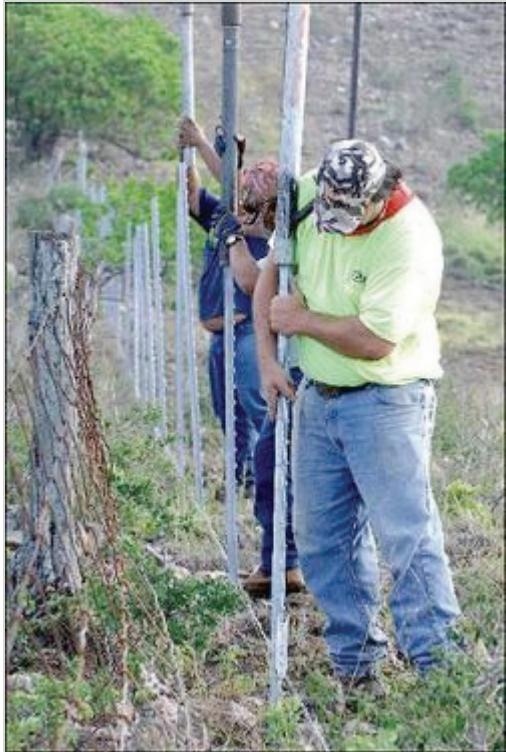
Field operations leader Brad Lau, who was raised on the Big Island, graduated from college in 2007 with a degree in health education. When he moved home, he decided first to try his hand at outdoor work, at a ranch. Two years ago, he got a job with the Kohala Watershed Partnership. The 20 or

so miles of fencing and all the work the crews are doing is important for the watershed, he said.

"Everything ties hand-in-hand in the ahupuaa," he said. "It rains at the top and it flows makai."



Jennifer Nutt tends to seedlings that will be planted for the Pelekane Bay Watershed Restoration Project funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. - Photo By Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today



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Workers pound fence posts as part of the Pelekane Bay Watershed Restoration Project. - Photo By Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today

young men were let go after they failed to show up to work a few weeks ago. Brad Lau was interviewing new candidates for the job Tuesday.

The new fencing -- 5 feet tall with three strands of barbed wire at the top and a strand flush with the ground, with hog wire in between -- is following the previously surveyed boundary, with an old wire fence as the guide. Fence crew leader Haia Auweloa said federal requirements mandate that new fences are built with materials made in the United States. They were holding off stringing the wires through the poles, however, after U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials questioned the potential impact of the barbed wire on the Hawaiian Hoary Bat. An environmental impact study was under way to make sure the endangered species would not be harmed by the wire.

As the four fence builders extended barbed wire and carried their post pounders from post to post, they exhibited a rhythm as they moved around each other. They kidded each other about being government employees and about goofing off. Later, Auweloa said they're working as fast as they can to impress the federal government.

"The more fencing we get done, the federal government sees that their money is being put to good use and might fund us if we ask for more," Auweloa said.

Restoration crew members have the same attitude, said Jennifer Nutt, a Big Island native who knew little about the problems invasive species bring until she applied to work on the project. The restoration crew spends a day a week tending plants at the state tree nursery, using space offered by the Department of Land and Natural Resources' Division of Forestry and Wildlife, a day building dams, a day planting seedlings and saplings in the field, a day watering the native species in the field and a day removing nonnative species.

"In the beginning, you're very much overwhelmed," Nutt said. "Now we're seeing what we're accomplishing. It looks like we're going to reach our goal. ... That's our biggest challenge, the race against time. Hopefully, there will be other grants and projects. We're building the foundation in 18 months."

He also sees the economic impact on the Big Island six months into the project -- from people who were laid off getting jobs to businesses like Miranda Fence Co. in Hilo, Walco International in Kawaihae and Ace Hardware in Waimea benefiting from supply purchases.

The hiring and work process for the federal project has been different from his previous experiences and understanding of how contracts work, he said Tuesday, as the dozen employees split up to head to a fence site or tend plants in the Kamuela State Nursery outside Waimea.

"It's been different from a normal state thing," he said. "You know how Hawaii is -- the shake of a hand."

Adam Anakalea, a plumber of 23 years who worked on Maui and the Big Island, agreed. In the past, he might be able to drive by a job site, ask if the crew needs help and start right away. For the stimulus-funded fencing job, which he saw advertised online, he had to go through interviews and clear a few more hurdles.

"It was like I was trying to find a job with the CIA," Anakalea said.

He and the three men wielding 65-pound post pounders at the field site makai of Kohala Mountain Road agreed -- the work was good and was for a good cause. Lau's brother, Pat Lau, was hired to work on the fence crew. Pat Lau said he did not get his job because his brother was a supervisor. Brad Lau excused himself from Pat Lau's interview. Pat Lau occasionally worked for the partnership prior to the federal project; his hours at the Hilton Waikoloa Village had been reduced to one day a week.

Not everyone hired initially is still doing the grueling physical work -- two

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