

Big Island Weekly

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Community

By Roger Harris & Diane Koerner

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How can the island best develop its agricultural industry?

After two years of analysis and review, the 2010 Hawaii County Agricultural Development Plan has been approved by the county's Research and Development Department and is now ready for formal review by the Hawaii County Council. Drafted by The Kohala Center to guide the revitalization of agriculture as a basis for the island's economic development, the plan contains a wide range of

measures intended to increase the production of agricultural products for both export and local consumption.

Thanks to a \$150,000 grant from the Health Impact Project, the Kohala Center will now be examining ways to ensure that the plan is executed with health considerations as the highest priority.

Betsy Cole, deputy director of The Kohala Center, said that the grant to do a Health Impact Assessment (HIA) will allow analysis of many factors, from the nutritional and economic benefits of growing and selling more food locally, to health in a broader context of overall well-being for Big Islanders.

Widely used in Europe as policy planning tools, HIAs are now emerging as valued tools in the United States as well. The goal of HIAs from the funder's standpoint is to factor health considerations into policy making, to help stem the rising tide of chronic disease, and to create safer, healthier communities.

"Health impact assessments can be used to weigh complex proposals and help decision makers craft solutions that avoid unforeseen effects and create conditions that give people every opportunity to lead healthy lives," said Aaron Wernham, M.D., director of the Health Impact Project.

The Kohala Center's HIA is one of the first in the nation to analyze the health impacts of an agricultural plan. Its findings, anticipated by December 2011, will not only help Hawaii balance priorities in agricultural development, but may be used as a model by other counties and states that are addressing similar issues.



What is the health impact of local ag development? - Photo By Diane Koerner

The exact foci of this new research program will be determined over the next few weeks by the Kohala Center and their HIA partners -- the Hawaii Department of Agriculture and Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Research. Previous input from the 13 public meetings during the Ag Plan development process will also be factored in.

Issues to be analyzed, according to Cole, might include the pros and cons of expanding commercial and home production of food, the trade-offs involved in different land use models (e.g., bio-fuel vs. food production), promoting the institutional buying of locally-grown food (e.g., by schools and hospitals), and the environmental impact of current and planned agricultural development.

"We hope the HIA will inform the public and private decision makers to pay more attention to agriculture in general and the value of it to the health of our society," said Cole.

To view the 2010 Agricultural Development Plan, go to <http://www.kohalacenter.org/agplan.html>.

To make suggestions on which issues the HIA might address, write to cole@kohalacenter.org.

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