

Local News

Ideas by the bushel at meeting

Farmers, Kohala Center seek ag plan for Big Isle

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Published: Thursday, October 29, 2009 9:19 AM HST

A nonprofit think tank is recommending Hawaii County take its agricultural base seriously by elevating an agriculture director to a Cabinet-level position and adding staff.

Currently only one county employee, in the Department of Research and Development, handles all questions and requests about agriculture. The Kohala Center, which held a public meeting Wednesday night in Hilo to discuss an agriculture development plan for the county, is recommending at least three employees be hired to assist the director.

The Cabinet-level director is the first priority on a list of 66 action items Kohala Center officials discussed with about 100 farmers, government officials, academics, growers and nursery owners gathered in the county's Aupuni Center conference room.

"It's the top priority because with that done, all the others can fall into place," said Guy Kaulukukui, director of the Kohala Center's Food Self-Reliance Program.

New employees or resources are unlikely during this tight budget climate, said county Finance Director Nancy Crawford.

"This is a very difficult year," Crawford said.

Although Mayor Billy Kenoi has praised the Kohala Center's work, that praise is unlikely to translate to dollars any time soon.

Retired University of Hawaii professor Yusuf Tamimi said discussions and studies come and go over the decades, but nothing changes because there is no structure. He recommended an agriculture advisory board to carry a vision and plan forward.

"We keep philosophizing and dreaming and repeating the same bloody things over and over and over," Tamimi said. "There is a missing mechanism for perpetuation of sustainability."

There's nothing in the county charter establishing any kind of agricultural advisory panel or official position, advocates say.

Less than 15 percent of the food consumed in the state is produced locally. In the event of a lengthy shipping strike, or a natural or man-made disaster, it's predicted that supermarkets would run out of food within two weeks.

The goal of the study is to point the way toward 30 percent food self-sufficiency by 2020 and 50 percent self-sufficiency by 2030.

Meetings on an ag plan are also slated from 6 to 8 p.m. tonight in the Paauilo School cafeteria, and Nov. 4 in the Pahoia Community Center from 6 to 8 p.m.

Other priorities in the list of 66 action items: convene a working group to push local food sales to government institutions, investigate tax incentives for working farms and community gardens, and promote agricultural tourism.

Farmers contributed ideas by the bushel. One idea: An interactive Web site to alert chefs about harvest schedules so they could plan menus accordingly. Establishing an agricultural land trust to protect land from development, with land leased to farmers, was another idea.