

Food system expansion tied to not-for-profit's report

By Carolyn Lucas-Zenk West Hawaii Today clucas-zenk@westhawaii.com January 7, 2014 - 1:01am

Almost two years since it was completed, The Kohala Center's Health Impact Assessment on Hawaii County's Agriculture Plan has garnered national attention and helped produce meaningful effects on the local food system.

Among the key findings, the assessment recommended the modification of state procurement practices to allow schools and other government institutions to make purchasing locally produced food easier; the promotion of agricultural careers; making the purchase of fresh, local food more convenient and affordable in rural areas; and the increase of local food-processing capacity through partnerships.

Specific outcomes based on some recommendations from the assessment have transpired. For instance, The Kohala Center — an independent, not-for-profit, community-based center for research, conservation and education — obtained federal funds to assist rural farmers markets to participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps. This has increased the access to fresh food for low-income families and individuals, as well as augmented small farmers' incomes. Monthly purchases by this population at participating farmers markets are typically between \$3,000 and \$4,000, said Matthews Hamabata, The Kohala Center's executive director.

The Kohala Center has also received more than \$1 million in funding for its Ku I Ka Mana, a beginning farmer training initiative, as well as to assist roughly 75 small family farms and value-added producers. Ku I Ka Mana, in particular, is training and supporting new farmers by helping them develop business plans, secure farm leases, gain access to farm equipment and materials, as well as successfully produce, market and distribute crops, Hamabata said.

The University of Hawaii is also developing six new farmer-training programs, he added.

Other implementations of the recommendations, according to The Kohala Center, are the state Department of Health's 2013 Physical Activity and Nutrition Plan including increasing school garden capacity, agricultural training and nutrition education, and the state Department of Education's School Food Authority hiring two staff members to work on local farm-to-school procurement.

The Health Impact Assessment built on earlier work by PingSun Leung at the University of Hawaii and Matthew Loke of the state Department of Agriculture, which showed replacing 10 percent of Hawaii imports with local farm output could result in the creation of more than 2,300 jobs, \$188 million in sales, \$47 million in earnings and \$6 million in state tax revenues.

"The assessment is so important because it connects the building of community health with the economy. ... It had a holistic approach that identified the risks and rewards associated with a project or given policy," Hamabata said. "It's good reading, particularly for the policy and decision makers who are using it. The assessment also provides a more accessible means for island

residents to get involved in addressing issues and making positive impacts.”

In particular, the assessment underscored the health-promoting benefits of greater production and consumption of locally grown food, including helping decrease the rates of obesity and other “entrenched diseases” like diabetes. The assessment suggested increased local production, including home and school gardening, could improve access to and affordability of more nutritious, farm-fresh food for families. Hamabata summed up the overall goal hoping to be achieved as “abundant land and thriving people.”

Hamabata said the assessment was “a testament to the wisdom of our local island communities.” He added, it was the same communities that first moved The Kohala Center forward in addressing issues of food self-reliance, energy self-reliance and ecosystem health many years ago.

Hamabata also said the assessment proved what residents have been saying and long understood at a gut-level about the importance of boosting locally-grown, healthy food and how it can make a real difference toward the island’s socio-economic and physical health.

Though progress has been made, there is still much work to be done toward other recommendations. The public can help as easily as by galvanizing support for the funders and their projects, Hamabata said.

The assessment, completed in February 2012, was funded by a \$150,000 grant from the Health Impact Project, a collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts, and was prepared for the county by The Kohala Center in partnership with the state Department of Agriculture and Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Research, Hawaii. Hamabata described the process as “very satisfying work” and said The Kohala Center would like to someday use the knowledge gained to help others in the state produce locally-based health impact assessments.

Last fall, the assessment was featured in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Connect Program, which allows grantees to discuss new approaches to improving health with national and international policymakers.

“The work The Kohala Center does is not only creative and innovative but more importantly, very necessary in instigating the much-needed change at both grass roots and institutional levels,” said Joy Barua, director of Community Benefit and Health Policy for Kaiser Permanente’s Hawaii Region.

To view the report online, go to kohalacenter.org/research.html.