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Stimulus funds devoted to Hawaii watershed restoration

By *KARIN STANTON*
For *The Associated Press*

KAILUA, KONA, Hawaii — Pelekane Bay was a sheltered place where fish once thrived, fed by streams from Kohala Mountain. Today, the inland Pelekane watershed is overrun by nonnative plants and animals, allowing sediment to flow into the bay.

Also, ranching, development, feral goats and wildfires have left the land mostly barren or covered with invasive fountain grass.

A local partnership is using \$2.7 million in federal stimulus money to restore the watershed, located on the northwest coast of the Big Island.

Matt Hamabata, executive director of The Kohala Center, said the project restores an entire ecosystem and is one of two Hawaii habitat restoration efforts and one of just 50 selected nationwide from 814 proposals to receive stimulus funding from NOAA.

The other Hawaii project is a \$3.4 million grant the Nature Conservancy received for its Maunalua Bay Reef Restoration Project on Oahu. That project will generate 73 jobs to implement a large-scale invasive alien algae removal program as the first step to restore marine habitat in the Kuliouou reef flats.

The community developed a restoration plan for Pelekane in 2005, but it wasn't until this year that The Kohala Center and the Kohala Watershed Partnership kick started the project with the help of Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii.

The partnership received the federal funds through a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration coastal restoration grant, which in turn is funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The 18-month Pelekane project is already under way with coordinator Melora Purell hiring 14 crew members.

"They are eager and enthusiastic," she said. "We're already working hard spraying weeds, collecting seeds from native plants and starting the build fences to keep out goats and other animals. The watershed has been trashed over time, but this is still a proactive measure."

Inouye, who attended a blessing ceremony for the project last month, said he pleased to see stimulus funds being applied to an environmental project.

"It's such a small amount of the active stimulus," he said. "It's one of those projects that people talk about doing. This is getting done. We will provide jobs and in the process save the bay. If you don't fix the whole watershed, you lose the bay."

The designated watershed area includes pastures, stream corridors and remnant native dry forest owned by Queen Emma Land Company (6,600 acres) and state Department of Land and Natural Resources (390 acres), all leased to Parker Ranch.

Other landowners include Ponohele Ranch, Kohala Preserve Conservation Trust, state Department of Hawaiian Home Lands, Laupahoehoe Nui LLC, Kahua Ranch and Kamehemeha Schools.

"The remarkable thing is that this is a voluntary coalition of public and private resources," Purell said.

Restoration goals include planting native vegetation along 6 miles of stream corridors, creating 50 sediment check dams and constructing 20 miles of fencing to create 11,750 acres free of feral goats.

Work is expected to be completed by December 2010.
