

# USDA grants to train, support next generation of farmers

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## MEDIA RELEASE

U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack recently announced \$18 million in federal funding to support new farmer training and education programs in 27 states.



The Kohala Center received a \$562,000 grant to create and deliver Ku I Ka Mana, a beginning farmer training initiative. The County of Hawaii is providing the necessary matching funds to secure the USDA grant.

Starting in the Hamakua region, The Kohala Center, in partnership with several local government agencies and academic institutions, will recruit, train, and support at least 40 new farmers over the next two years.

The program will also help these new farmers develop business plans, secure farm leases, gain access to farm equipment and materials, and successfully produce, market, and distribute their crops.

As part of this program, The Kohala Center is developing a farm training site in Honokaa, which will be used to teach successful farming practices.

Ku I Ka Mana supports several primary goals of The Kohala Center, state and county governments, island leaders, and community groups: to increase local food production, decrease dependency on imports, diversify Hawaii Island's rural economy, create jobs, and promote greater self-reliance.

Though there are abundant fertile lands and a 12-month growing season, Hawaii Island imports approximately 85 percent of its food from at least 2,500 miles away. Issues such as food security, energy costs, and time required to transport perishable food make the need to increase local food production even more critical.

To address some of the island's economic challenges and take advantage of its resources, a primary recommendation of the county Agriculture Development Plan is to "expand Hawaii Island food production so that 30 percent of its residents' demand for food can be supplied by local producers by 2020."

With its abundant natural resources, available farmland, consistent supply of irrigation water, and its agricultural history and heritage, the Hamakua region is well positioned to play a leadership role in agricultural development on the island and in the state.

A recent University of Hawaii (UH) study identifies small-scale farms producing food for local consumption as the sector of Hawaii's agriculture industry with the greatest potential for future growth.

In recent Hamakua Community Development Planning workshops, however, the identified challenges facing potential farmers and ranchers in the area are daunting.

“While a lack of knowledge and experience in farming and ranching discourages many prospective farmers across the country from entering the industry, Hawaii faces additional, unique challenges,” said Dr. Elizabeth Cole, deputy director of The Kohala Center.

“Higher land and resource costs, market and distribution challenges, and limited access to capital are among the hurdles that discourage both novice and experienced farmers from pursuing agricultural endeavors in the state,” Cole said. “The Kohala Center and Ku I Ka Mana will help program participants navigate and overcome many of these barriers through education; access to leasable farmland, equipment, and materials; business planning; mentoring by successful island producers; and access to loans and other funding sources.”

Along with Cole, Ku I Ka Mana will be facilitated and managed by three prominent agricultural leaders:

- \* Jim Cain, a successful taro farmer and poi producer on Hawaii Island for 20 years. In addition to managing a farm education and consulting service, he took the lead in creating Ku I Ka Mana, of which he is the current director

- \* Melanie Bondera, rural cooperative development specialist with the Laulima Center, and a successful family farmer on Hawaii Island for 10 years. Bondera will help with curriculum development, teach, and assist with the development of cooperative processing and distribution strategies

- \* Dr. Russell Nagata, former professor of horticultural science, plant breeding and genetics, and plant pathology at both the University of Florida and at UH-Hilo, and current Hawaii County Administrator for the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources at UH-Manoa. Nagata will provide technical expertise in curriculum development, teach in his areas of expertise, and coordinate the participation of additional UH faculty in the program.

“Across the islands, there is a growing awareness of our need for local food security,” Bondera said. “Farmers markets have grown tremendously and consumers want to buy local. Our leaders are looking to rebuild our local food system. But they have many questions; key among them ‘Where will we find the farmers?’ Our beginning farmer training program—and others like it around the state and country funded by the USDA grant program—will answer that question, and give these desperately needed new farmers the incentive, resources, and support to enter the industry and be successful.”

Beginning farmers who successfully complete the training program and create viable farm and business plans will be able to work with the state Department of Agriculture to execute short-term leases on farmlands managed by the Hamakua-North Hilo Agricultural Coop, County of Hawaii and Kapulena Agricultural Park, with the understanding that satisfactory farm operation start-up will allow for longer-term land occupancy.

“We plan for this to be a sustainable program that will live beyond the initial USDA funding,” Cain said. “We anticipate harnessing the knowledge and successes achieved during the grant period to deliver the program in at least two other areas on the island in the future. Hamakua is an ideal place to start, and with the variety of microclimates on Hawaii Island, breadth of viable and available agricultural lands, and diversity of crops that can be grown here, the potential of this program to move our island communities closer to self-reliance is remarkable. This program will provide the training and support that will enable small-scale family farmers to be successful, and help make our valuable agricultural lands productive for generations to come.”

Community members interested in learning more or applying to Ku I Ka Mana may call Jim Cain at [jcain@kohalacenter.org](mailto:jcain@kohalacenter.org) or 808-333-0457 or visit: [www.kohalacenter.org/farmertra...](http://www.kohalacenter.org/farmertra...)

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