



## Summer 2021 Hawai'i Farmer & Rancher Focus Groups

*In Partnership with KUA on behalf of  
Transforming Hawai'i Food Systems Together*

### Overview:

Hawaii Good Food Alliance (HGFA) executed needs assessments and gathered feedback from farmers and ranchers on Transforming Hawaii Food Systems Together (THFST)'s Food Systems Map, as well as key support and policy advocacy needs during the summer of 2021.

As proof of the widespread and growing interest in Hawai'i's food system, over 250 stakeholders have participated in the creation of the food system map facilitated by THFST. The stories contained in the map's loops will inform the Food Systems Equity and Resilience Strategy, Integrated Policy Framework and related efforts across the state. Participants reached consensus for the 20-year North Star for Hawai'i's food system: to drive community well-being, economic vibrancy and ecological resilience. They also decided the Near Star (5-10 year) is to make local food a healthy, accessible and affordable choice for Hawaii communities. In March 2021, two workshops resulted in identification of three leverage points or places in the system where small-scale investments can have out-sized impacts that can drive catalytic changes: capital flows to the local food system; policies for local resilience; and local processing, packing, storage, and distribution.

These farmer focus groups consisted of approximately 15 farmers and ranchers per group, across 6 locations (31 on Hawai'i Island), encompassing all 6 major islands, for a total of 106 farmers and ranchers participating. Of the 106 participating farmers, 43 identified as female (41%), 30 as Native Hawaiian (28%), and 28 as kupuna (26%). Members of various farming organizations were included statewide, including Hawai'i Farmers Union United, Farm Bureau, and the Cattlemen's Association.

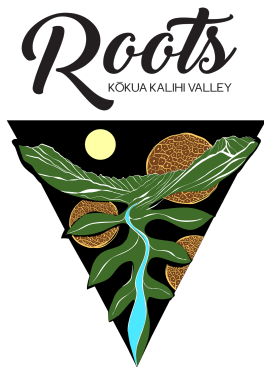
Each focus group introduced participants to the THFST project and gathered feedback and priorities on the Food Systems Map and key leverage points previously developed by THFST. Groups then gathered input on the most helpful food system strategies to move food producers' work forward based on these key leverage points and others they identified and on the types of policies that need to be developed or expanded and/or how the County and/or State government can best support their work. The results of these focus groups will be integrated into and inform the Hawaii Integrated Food Policy Framework and Food Systems Equity and Resilience Strategy from Transforming Hawaii Food Systems Together.

*Focus groups were held in June and July 2021*

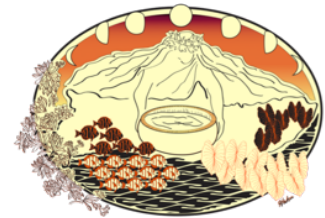
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*Mahalo to the participating focus group leads:*



M ā l a m a  
K a u a ' i



Sust 'āina ble Moloka'i  
Working to restore 'Āina Momona




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## Community Summaries:

### Hawai'i Island Summary

**Demographics** - One-on-one interviews were led by The Food Basket with 31 farmers, of which 18 were female (58%), 3 were Native Hawaiian (10%), and 10 were kupuna (32%).



“ Access to land is an issue... we need to be able to live on the farm. It is too difficult to lease/rent/buy a residence and to lease farmland. ”

Hawai'i Island Farmer Focus Group Participant

**Key Levers** - The programs and services needed that were mentioned by most farmers were:

- **Job Creation:** general farm laborers were reported to be the biggest need for farmers (68% of those interviewed listed this as their top priority)
- **Capital flows to local food system:** need for more grant and loan opportunities, along with grant writing assistance and technical assistance
- **Local processing, packing, storage and distribution:** more processing facilities are needed across the island for farmers to utilize.

A key need that was not included in the map is soil health management support, including pest management.

### General Support

- **The following programs are helpful and should be supported:** UH CTAHR, NRCS, Hawaii Eco Experiences, The Kohala Center, The Food Basket, GoFarm Hawai'i, and USDA Farm Bill Programs, BRIDGES program, the Farm to Car program, and other conservation services.
- **The following programs and services are needed (or should be increased):** grant and loan opportunities and grant writing assistance, technological support
- **Need help negotiating a fair market price:** local farms struggle to compete with mainland competitors
- **Key investments that would ensure the survival of farm businesses include:** 68% percent of farmers stated that farm laborers (harvest, washing, packing produce) were needed, along with 48% said equipment (tractors, harvesting machines, computers), 32% said greenhouses, and 32% reported need for facilities (processing, bathrooms, washing stations, mobile slaughterhouses, greenhouse facilities)
- **Other Reported Challenges:** environment (lava, hurricanes, unpredictable weather); agricultural theft; interisland shipping costs and production quantity intrastate; lack of live animal auction houses
- **Other Reported Needs:** finding consistent buyers for specialty products; maintenance of waterways used by farms; developing well established clientele and distribution network; subsidized farming inputs; replication of the Hawaii 'Ulu Co-Operative model for other crops; increased community education about 'buying local'; policies that encourage farms to continue business (such as the Organic Food production tax credit and other tax policies); mentoring, training and apprenticeships; more agricultural programs; producing value-added items to secure buyers and find markets to sell product; vets specializing in farm animals.

### Political Advocacy

- **Grants & Loans:** create more grant and low-interest loans for farmers with a simplified application process
- **Funding for processing facilities:** more processing facilities are needed across the island for farmers to utilize; because we are all so spread out, we need facilities that are within a reasonable distance
- **Reduced shipping costs**

## Maui Summary

**Demographics** - 14 farms, including 2 on Lānaʻi - 2 (14%) participating farmers were Female and 2 (14%) were Native Hawaiian. Focus groups were led by Hawaiʻi Public Health Institute's Maui Nui Food Alliance.

### Key Levers

- **Cultivating careers:** the farming labor shortage issue is a main concern for farmers; there is a need for legal housing for farm staff, low-cost loans to obtain land and other capital expenses to begin farming, incentivize farming with tax breaks and low water costs, increase farm to school education, and invest in marketing farming as fun and viable, with a focus on the benefits of the farming lifestyle
- **Carrots for landowners:** there needs to be better mechanisms in place to address “gentleman farmers,” those who live on land with an agriculture exemption who do not farm; access to land and housing is a leading barrier that is preventing the next generation from farming
- **Local processing, packing, storage and distribution:** processing facilities needed to prevent waste, support for value-added production, systems for waste-to-feed programs, and an industrial composting center
- **Agritourism:** farm tours are becoming appealing to diversify income, yet setting up tours is time consuming and not in alignment with some farms' missions to focus on food access for residents. Invest in greater promotion of farms and farm tours to increase education and support farmers
- **Education:** farm to school curriculum can provide a holistic education, teaching the value of caring for the earth and supporting farmers, while building the next generation of farmers
- **Policy:** major policy needs have to be addressed, including issues with water and axis deer hunting/sales; formal assessment of the Maui food system should be done

“There need to be more mechanisms to protect food costs, farmers cannot compete with mainland subsidies.”

Maui Farmer Focus Group Participant

Water was identified as a key lever not identified on the food systems map that should be added.

### General Support

- **Animal feed support:** production or subsidization of local feed for animal production; feed costs are often the biggest expense for most producers who raise hogs, chicken or cattle
- **Water availability:** water was a consistent topic of the Maui focus group and is a key area that needs to be addressed
- **Subsidized equipment and mechanic:** large equipment sharing / cooperative type model could improve small farm access to important yet expensive tools; mechanics needed to handle repairs and maintenance for equipment like tractors
- **Processing facility investments:** Maui County lacks processing facilities of all types; significant investment and effort needs to be made to create in the infrastructure needed for a healthy food system; building a commercial composting facility, a processing center to help lessen food waste and reduce transportation costs, help with feed costs, and support the commercial sale and slaughter of animals such as deer, to benefit farmers, ranchers, hunters and consumers

**Political Advocacy** - Maui is now investing more in agriculture than in tourism on a county-level, which farmers are hopeful about. There is hope that the Maui County Department of Agriculture, which is forming, will be part of the solution to support farmers and local food production. Two major efforts could involve reviewing and removing



regulations that are barriers to local production, as well as completing a formal food systems asset map and needs assessment. Some key policy issues farmers prioritized:

- **Address water issues:** improving access to affordable water, providing transparency on water costs, and supporting incentives or further discounts for agricultural water use
- **Meat processing issues:** lack of slaughter facilities and USDA inspectors, combined with regulatory environment, prevents successful processing and marketing of small scale livestock and axis deer utilization; government efforts to resolve this would open doors to opportunity
- **Support DaBux:** continue support for local food subsidies for those in need in our communities
- **Agricultural land use and access:** a more clear definition of appropriate ag land usage and regulation; many farmers felt solar farms were not appropriate uses of what could be productive agricultural lands; affordable land for farmers needs to be made more accessible
- **Reduced shipping costs**



*O'ahu Farmers met at Kokua Kalihi Valley for their focus group over dinner*

## North Shore and Windward O'ahu Summary

**Demographics** - 15 participants gathered in in-person focus group meetings led by Kōkua Kalihi Valley. One participant was female (7%), 6 (40%) Native Hawaiian, and 6 (40%) Kupuna.

### Key Levers

- **Agriculture Economy:** policies that support local resilience was an important lever for the group
- **Carrots for Landowners:** attractive tenure and contract terms, capital flow to the local food system, landowners being incentivized to meet food system needs, and viable food system businesses or programs
- **Cultivating Careers:** key leverage points included capital flow to the local food system, job creation, and viable food system business or programs; youth and new farmer opportunities- paid, grassroots, programs for youth to learn farming and have access to land ownership including scholarships for master gardening, livable wages for farmers, housing and healthcare for farmers, local woofing for local kids, teaching science of farming

- **Carbon FOODprint:** important points mentioned in this area were related to resource use and generation of waste, localizing processing, packaging, storage and distribution models, the value of local resources, localizing inputs for farming
- **Snap Out of It:** here the key point was to practice self-sufficiency and Aloha Aina; support for that included policies, local food sharing or purchasing, and the need for social safety nets
- **Mend the Nets, Catch the Fish:** levers identified in this area included local food sharing and purchasing, locally grown and harvested food, and viable food system business or programs
- **‘Āina is ‘Ōhana:** emphasized the importance of emotional, physical, spiritual health and wellness/ the practice of self-sufficiency, and the practices of aloha and kuleana for local food and aina traditions

### **General Support**

- **Issues around water:** access, availability needs to be addressed
- **Comprehensive hub for networking:** resources, grant opportunities, learning about farming, the food system- guidance and direction for new farmers, developing business plans, tracking business performance, activating farmers’ common voice, sharecropping
- **Land use:** agreements, access to land, land trusts to hold land in perpetuity, inventory of land that is available
- **Public Awareness:** promote a clear understanding of who we are aiming to feed and understanding who is in control of what the audience is being fed, reprioritizing agriculture businesses from cash value to nutritional and environmental value
- **Show value for climate-based farming:** regenerative crops/farm management

### **Political Advocacy**

- **Land access:** make it harder for people who don’t farm to get agricultural land, improve loan programs for those with limited capital to acquire land
- **Food procurement policy:** provide subsidies to institutions that buy and source locally first, mandate percentage of state and Federal purchases for local food
- **Land leases:** longer term for high performing agricultural land leases, set standards for market value for land to support nutrition vs. high value crops (food vs. flowers)
- **Politicians and policy makers should visit farms**
- **Economic policy:** to support economic viability of farmer, housing, health care
- **Multi-level policy:** federal, state, local, organizational (i.e., Kamehameha Schools)
- **Funding:** federally backed initiatives, government subsidies and institutional purchasing policy, leverage funds to improve nutritional value of crops and ecological effects

## **Wai‘anae, O‘ahu Summary**

**Demographics** - 15 participants were interviewed by Kahumana Organic Farms. 5 (33%) participants identified as female, 3 (20%) as Native Hawaiian and 3 (20%) as Kupuna.

### **Key Levers**

- **Job Creation:** many farmers are having a hard time finding/accessing farm workers; several farmers were in the process of increasing production and this limits their ability to do so
- **Landowners incentivized for food systems needs:** need for general land access and ag housing incentivization, especially by large landowners who do not utilize their ag lands productively; worker housing, reasonable land ownership opportunities, and high expenses of utilities must be addressed; work with existing landowners to find ways for beginning farmers to have farmland; other states have progressive policies to incentivize landowners to work with those who want to farm; farmers often not able to be the “best bidder”
- **Capital flows to local food system:** small local farmers should be subsidized like large mainland farmers

- **Local processing, packing, storage and distribution:** processing facilities needed to prevent waste, support for value-added production, systems for waste-to-feed programs, and an industrial composting center
- **‘Āina is ‘Ohana:** fully support those who have been and continue to create ‘Āina Momona - practices that nurture and support the land and the sea

#### General Support

- **Need financial support for high expenses of utilities:** cost of utilities such as water and electricity was brought up
- **Access to workers:** create a tool - pool of who's looking to hire and connect them with workers; possible to partner with partners like MA'O - spread info about work opportunities
- **Land and housing access:** worker housing and reasonable land ownership opportunities
- **Redirect more attention to smaller growers:** allocate funding to small farmers, home growers and their networks through mini-grants to increase food production and food security

#### Political Advocacy

- **Provide subsidies for farms:** would be great to offer incentives to attract workers, almost like MA'O (offering stipends, tuition waivers, etc)
- **Incentives for landowners:** there is a need to incentivize landowners to promote the lease, sale, or land transfer to local farmers who are growing specifically for local consumption; most farmland is being either bought up/used for export oriented crops
- **Government should fund food hubs:** support food hubs so they can relieve farmers of packaging and storage costs.

### Moloka'i Summary

**Demographics** - 15 participants included 2 primarily livestock (cattle) producers, and 13 fruit and vegetable farmers. 6 participants identified as Female (40%), 12 as Native Hawaiian (80%), and 7 as Kupuna (46%). Focus group was led by Sust'ainable Molokai.

#### Key Levers

- **Capital flows to Local Food system:** farmers need help accessing funding to start farms (low-interest loans, grants that are user friendly for farmers; there is so much paperwork for loans and grants; TA would be super helpful) Primary funding needs: value-added equipment, fencing, refrigeration, business start-up costs, certifications/audits/food-safety upgrades; DHHL should also provide funding to support agriculture on homesteads
- **Local processing, packing, storage and distribution:** farmers are grateful for the services offered by Sustainable Molokai in this area, but realize their capacity is limited; the state should fund a food hub and food bank facility (with sufficient capacity for processing, storage, etc.) for each island; also need better/more affordable options to connect to larger off-island markets

“‘Āina is ohana. It's been my experience that mama `āina loves to feed us. We belong to the `āina. He Alii ka `Aina, he kauwa ke kanaka. "The land is chief, people it's servants."

When our decision making is based on this reality we will be on our way to co-creating `Aina Momona and there will be plenty for all.

Wai'anae Farmer Focus Group Participant



- **Policies for local resilience / Practice of self-sufficiency & Aloha 'Āina:** there are numerous ways that government could and should support local resilience and self-sufficiency; key ways include: institutional purchasing (especially schools), incentives/taxes to make local food more competitively priced with imported food; subsidies for farmers (more details in Policy Section below)
- **Job Creation:** need to get youth more engaged, pass on knowledge to the next generation; internships, jobs, volunteer opportunities, educational pathways/programs all needed (kanaka-based, cultural based education); valued perception of working in Ag sector/ranching is low; not seen as financially viable nor admirable; need “vision” for youth, create examples that inspire - entrepreneurship; grant writing development within our community - focus on training some of our youth
- **Landowners incentivized for food systems needs:** this is especially true for DHHL lands on Molokai; there are numerous large DHHL ag lots that are not being farmed; DHHL should use their financial resources to take action and support ag

Farmers noted three other critical needs: access to land, water, and technicians/specialists. Molokai has lots of land, but most of it is not easily accessible to new farmers (DHHL, State Ag Park). Regarding water, the biggest issue is the need for improvements to the water system. Lastly, we need more technicians/Ag specialists, as there are not enough on island. We need help identifying pests, diseases, etc. We should have more CTAHR positions here. Soil samples have to be sent to the continent, and often takes 4-5 months of waiting before we can plant (another example of something that should be localized for infrastructure/support).

#### **General Support**

- **Administrative Support:** farmers need help writing grants, getting certifications, business set-up/support, production planning, taxes, filling out loan applications, accounting, and more Ag trainings that are kanaka-focused/speak to cultural values
- **Need efforts to increase local demand:** could have increased demand/markets for farmers if schools and restaurants bought more local food
- **Support for scaling up local food production:** awareness/education around the importance of producing local food; as a community we need to increase our natural disaster preparedness, reduce our reliance on the barge and the global supply chain; need to have farmers growing/manufacturing their own inputs
- **Localizing Inputs:** would be great to create co-ops to create compost, amendments, biochar, etc.; this would increase our self-sufficiency, and reduce our costs by not having to import and pay for shipping

#### **Political Advocacy**

- **Keep local food on-island:** institutional purchasing (schools should be required to purchase local), make local food more competitive in pricing (e.g., taxes on imported food); limit percentage of imported food; Incentives for stores to purchase local
- **Government should fund a food hub facility for each island**
- **Government should provide subsidies for farmers**
- **Funding for Farm to School programs:** to provide fresh/local food for schools and mandated garden/ag curriculum that is kānaka-based, teaches aloha 'āina
- **Deer management:** need an island-wide management system, including policies for a Deer Hui and funding for the Molokai Hunting Club; current grant is for the Hunting Club to work with landowners (Molokai Ranch, Pu'u o Hoku Ranch, DHHL), keeping deer meat on-island while doing management for the community; need to identify more USDA inspectors and Certification for more local shooters
- **Reduced shipping costs**

#### **Kaua'i Summary**

**Demographics** - 15 participants included 4 primarily livestock (cow, sheep, chicken) producers as well as 11 fruit and vegetable farmers (several who additionally had small livestock production). 11 (73%) of producers were women, 4 (27%) Native Hawaiian, and 1 (7%) considered themselves Kupuna. Members from Hawaii Farmers Union

United, Kauaʻi County Farm Bureau, and Kauaʻi Cattlemen's Association were present. Focus group was led by Mālama Kauaʻi.

**Key Levers** - It was discussed that the goal is really to place importance on *locally grown and harvested food*, but that the other areas of the map are more so the HOW of how to get there. Some of the top “bubbles” in the map that were commonly chosen amongst farmers as key priorities included:

- **Landowners incentivized for food systems needs:** need for general land access and ag housing incentivization, especially by large landowners who do not utilize their ag lands productively; they also felt that landowners need be de-incentivized to *not* support local food systems needs through stronger taxing and enforcement as these sometimes have better results than just incentives
- **Local processing, packing, storage and distribution:** the majority of participants experienced a shortage in available cold storage, commercial kitchens, and other processing equipment/facilities for both produce and proteins which causes bottlenecks for their productivity and distribution
- **Capital flows:** a shortage in grant programs directly for food producers instead of loans; simplifying the programs that do become available to make them more accessible to small businesses
- **Policies for local resilience:** it was recognized that there is vocal support for agriculture, but not “when the rubber meets the road” in terms of policies or investment strategies
- **Job creation:** more funding for programs like the Aloha Aina Workforce Program or other programs that provide funding for labor and to build the career pipeline; a supported “matchmaker” role between students/workers and producers seeking help

Food producers noted that water access and soil health seemed to be missing as key components to the food systems map that should be called out more directly. Water was the #1 barrier/challenge that needed addressing in the 2017 Kauaʻi Farmer Survey by Mālama Kauaʻi from over 100 Kauaʻi farmers, and is related to many of the Food Safety Modernization Act requirements. Soil fertility with the weather-worn soils of Kauaʻi is incredibly critical to productivity - and a key goal to be addressed by the Kauaʻi Chapter of Hawaiʻi Farmers Union United.

### **General Support**

- **Jobs Programs:** paid workforce and training opportunities have been very beneficial; would like to see more support for these programs, as well as a dedicated “connector” between job opportunities and interested students/candidates; Mālama Kauai’s Aloha Aina Workforce Program and GoFarm have been good examples and HFUU has a beginning farmer training program they are seeking funding for as well
- **Tool Library & Equipment Hui:** HFUU Kauaʻi Chapter has a tool library that lends/rents small equipment out to farmers as a type of equipment cooperative; many would like to see this model expanded to include things like tractors, wood chippers, etc.; will require funding, management, and maintenance
- **Localizing Inputs:** importing feed and fertilizers is increasing costs - need support for localized replacements; current efforts (ex. Hartung pelletizer & baling effort) are helpful but not enough to meet our needs; ideas to support included a more coordinated network of waste to animals and composting; County composting efforts that supplement farmers directly; increased production of livestock feed products; and incentives or support for composting & cover cropping
- **Marketing with Food Hubs:** aggregation/distribution at scale helped a lot of farmers during the pandemic, but food hub bill got deferred again; need more subsidized support for these models

**Political Advocacy** - The majority of food producers felt they did not have a voice, weren’t heard when speaking to the government about their needs, and that the larger farming groups didn’t necessarily represent their needs and interests as smaller producers. They welcome support in having a louder and more unified voice in what matters to them. Some immediate needs included:



- **Grant Programs:** simplify them and make more accessible to small ag businesses; use an intermediary to make it easy if necessary; food producers want grants, not loans; nonprofits to write more grants directly for food producers as a pass-through
- **Taxing Landowners:** incentivizing or de-incentivizing behavior to support farmers; agricultural dedication utilization needs more management and accountability
- **Shipping Costs:** shipping increases have been an immense burden and the Farm Service Agency Transportation Cost Reimbursement program is a lot of paperwork for very little return; this must be addressed as we have a near monopoly on shipping - government could subsidize food producer shipping or create legislation controlling shipper charges
- **Compost & Soil Fertility:** other islands supply landowners with compost made from local sources, but Kaua'i charges for it; state-level compost and cover crop bills died this legislative session; need all levels of government to increase access to local resources
- **Food Hub Bill:** HFUU-sponsored food hub bill died last session, should be reconsidered and supported as food hubs support farmers directly by helping them to move product quickly without having to do their own marketing

Some example model efforts mentioned were Chile (wine) and Mexico (blueberries) where they selected some key crops and invested significant private and public resources to help farmers grow, process, and market the products into highly successful agricultural sectors.

This could be done for Hawai'i with a wide variety of crops. Right now the community/private sector is leading the way with crops like taro, breadfruit, ginger/turmeric, cacao - but is running these efforts on shoestring budgets with disjointed support.

*“If we want to offer our grass fed beef to our consumer, the shipping is a significant cost to the rancher as well as the consumer. Costco is inherently cheaper by not having to ship off island and then back.”*

Kaua'i Farmer Focus Group Participant

## Overall Summary and Recommendations:

There needs to be greater representation, prioritization and investment in agriculture at the State and County levels. It was widely perceived that policy-makers do not understand the perspectives and needs of farmers.

Policy makers need to engage more with our agricultural communities and find ways to benefit their work in practical ways and lessen their burdens. Visit their constituent farmers and hear their stories. Many would also like to see those with agricultural backgrounds in leadership positions in government and politics.

Some of the key takeaways for policy needs and general support included:

- **Land Use & Access**

- Regulate and enforce agriculture land use with more accountability
- Utilize both incentives (for using ag land for active ag) and increased taxes (for not using ag land for active ag) to modify landowner behavior
- Increase farmer access to government-owned agricultural lands with long-term leases
- Increase ability to develop farmworker housing
- Water management systems require significant attention on all islands, but are even more pressing given new Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) requirements

- **Private & Public Investments In Agriculture**

- Funding for various **processing facilities** including composting and local fertilizer development, feed development, cold storage/processing/packing, slaughtering, etc.
- **Grant programs** for farmers with a much more simplified application process; use a third party to manage for government if needed to streamline paperwork and provide assistance
- Financial subsidies for **shipping costs**; current programs are insufficient and have a high paperwork burden not always worth the time and effort
- **Workforce programming** investments at many levels are needed, including in-school programs, internship and apprenticeship programs, job matching services, and subsidized workforce programs for adults

- **Specific Legislative Initiatives**

- Reduction in, or subsidization of, shipping costs (no bill correspond to this)
- Food Hub Pilot Program ([SB338](#), 2021)
- Cover Crop Bill (SB337, 2021)
- Composting Bill (HB861, 2021)
- Future Farmer training Bill ([HB1894](#), 2020)

“We need a lot more people in the legislature with an ag background.”

Maui Farmer Focus Group Participant