

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN DANIEL K. AKAKA

Safeguarding Hawai'i's Ecosystem and Agriculture Against Invasive Species
Hearing
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,
the Federal Workforce, and the District of Columbia
U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

I want to welcome our witnesses to today's hearing, *Safeguarding Hawai'i's Ecosystem and Agriculture Against Invasive Species*. Hawai'i has a history of being a leader in recognizing the grave threat that invasive species pose to our native agriculture, economies, and natural resources. Hawai'i's efforts to safeguard its ecosystem and agriculture date back to 1888, when King Kalākaua declared a quarantine on imported coffee to prevent the introduction of coffee rust, and other diseases. This was decades before the United States government enacted the landmark Plant Quarantine Act of 1912.

Hawai'i's efforts continue to this day, as harmful invasive species arrive daily at our State's ports of entry, often hidden in agricultural cargo or inside passenger bags. Failure to detect and intercept these harmful pests imposes serious economic and social burdens on all residents of Hawai'i. Invasive species already cost Hawai'i hundreds of millions of dollars annually in lost agricultural revenue, property damage, and eradication programs. In light of the severe economic damage that is inflicted on the people of Hawai'i, it is clear that focusing on prevention by improving agricultural inspections at our ports of entry is a very cost-effective strategy.

Of course, economic costs are just one aspect of the consequences that would result from allowing invasive species to enter our State. Invasive species threaten to permanently devastate our State's fragile island ecosystem, and in the process, destroy our State's economy and character. Nearly 60 years after its arrival in Guam, the Brown Tree Snake continues to inflict terrible, and irreversible, damage on that island's ecosystem and economy. Guam's painful experience should serve as a stark reminder of the urgent need to enhance our efforts to protect Hawai'i's majestic natural environment, which is home to more endangered species per square mile than any other area on the planet, and provides the foundation of our State's culture and heritage. It also attracts millions of tourists to the islands each year, making Hawai'i's tourism industry one of the strongest in the nation.

This hearing will examine how government agencies, stakeholders, and most importantly, the people of Hawai'i can work together to prevent invasive species from entering our State. I am particularly interested in exploring how Congress can best support Hawai'i in enhancing agricultural inspections, which are critical for detecting harmful pests and diseases at our State's ports of entry.

I would like to commend Hawai'i's efforts to safeguard the State against invasive species. Hawai'i has made significant progress in improving invasive species prevention and response, despite having limited resources. Many of the State's reforms have been successful in improving interagency coordination, and raising awareness of the important role each resident of Hawai'i must play in safeguarding our State.

I am pleased that our State, under the strong leadership of Governor Abercrombie, and Representative Tsuji and Senator Nishihara, the respective Chairs of the Hawai'i Legislature's House and Senate Agriculture Committees, has committed to building the necessary inspection facilities and restoring our State's agriculture inspector workforce, which was cut by 53 percent in 2009.

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, Congress passed the Homeland Security Act of 2002, which unified Federal customs, immigration, and agriculture inspection officers under the new U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The decision to transfer frontline agricultural import and entry inspection functions from the Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, (APHIS), into the DHS Customs and Border Protection (CBP) was a controversial decision.

I have long been concerned that the transfer resulted in significant disruptions to the agriculture mission and undermined the effectiveness of agricultural inspections. Other Members of Congress have expressed similar concerns, and there have even been efforts to remove agricultural inspection responsibilities from the Department of Homeland Security and return them to the Department of Agriculture.

While I understand these sentiments, as Chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, I understand that such drastic reorganizations are often costly and disruptive. In light of our Nation's fiscal challenges, I have concluded it is most efficient and effective to focus on strengthening the agricultural inspection mission within CBP, which in recent years, has made meaningful progress in stabilizing the agency's agricultural import and entry inspection operations.

I recently introduced the Safeguarding American Agriculture Act of 2011 (S. 1673), which seeks to build upon these gains and fully achieve an important measures of success identified in the June 2007 Report of the APHIS-CBP Joint Task Force on Improved Agriculture Inspection: "Success will be accomplished when the agriculture function within CBP is positioned prominently throughout the organization. The potential introduction of plant and animal pest and diseases will be regarded with the same fervor as all other mission areas within CBP."

The Act would enhance the priority of, and accountability for, the agriculture mission by establishing within CBP an Office of Agriculture Inspection led by an Assistant Commissioner responsible for improving agricultural inspections across the Nation. This provision would improve efficiency and coordination by unifying agriculture policy development with agriculture operations. An agricultural chain of command that extends from the Assistant Commissioner for Agriculture Inspection to frontline agriculture specialists at the ports would also effectively address a key issue the task force identified in its 2007 report: "Management and leadership infrastructure supporting the agriculture mission in CBP should be staffed and empowered at levels equivalent to other functional mission areas in CBP."

Under the present organizational structure, the Deputy Executive Director for CBP's office of Agriculture Operational Oversight within the office of Agriculture Programs and Trade Liaison, which falls under the Office of Field Operations, is responsible for improving oversight of the agricultural mission across all CBP field offices by ensuring a more consistent application of agriculture inspection policy. However, the Deputy Executive Director lacks operational authority over the agriculture mission. Moreover, the dissemination and implementation of agricultural policy at the ports is ultimately at the discretion of CBP Officers who typically do not have agriculture expertise and are primarily focused on the critical mission of preventing terrorists and terrorist weapons from entering the country.

To maintain a highly skilled and motivated agriculture specialist workforce, the Act would require CBP to create a comprehensive agriculture specialist career track that identifies appropriate career paths and ensures that agriculture specialists receive the training, experience, and assignments necessary for successful career. The bill also would require CBP to develop plans to improve agriculture specialist recruitment and retention and to make sure agriculture specialists have the necessary equipment and resources to effectively carry out their mission.

To strengthen critical working relationships and promote interagency experience, the Act would authorize the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Secretary of Agriculture to establish an interagency rotation program for CBP and APHIS personnel.

Taken together, the enhancements contained in the Safeguarding American Agriculture Act of 2011 would elevate the stature of the agriculture mission in CBP to match the magnitude of the challenge posed by invasive pests and disease. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today on how we can implement these improvements across the nation and here in Hawai'i.

Additional information on this hearing, including witness statements:

http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Hearings.Hearing&Hearing_id=84d5449b-d770-4f15-93ce-3a963ce7188e

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