



Western SARE Conference Focuses on Sustaining Hawaii Ag

More than 100 farmers, university educators and researchers and ag-support people from Hawaii gathered Sept. 23-24 in Kona to chart the future for sustaining Hawaii agriculture.

The conference, sponsored by the Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program, featured several keynote presentations from Hawaii representatives involved in agriculture as well as focused tabletop discussions designed to elicit ideas on how Western SARE can better serve island agriculture.

The links for the Hawaii conference on this website provide details of the conference, including 17 posters and handouts that showcase Western SARE-funded projects in the Pacific. What follows here is a brief overview of conference presentations:

When the University of Hawaii College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, CTAHR, recently embarked on a strategic planning process to develop core values, it arrived at these: diversified economy, sustainable environment, strong families and communities.

“We do well in the agricultural arena,” said CTAHR Dean Andy Hashimoto. “But a real challenge is to get our faculty to work together to achieve this balance of economy, environment and family.”



Hashimoto

For example, Hashimoto said, bio-energy is a hot topic. It's one thing to research the economics of bio-energy crops, but what will be the impacts on the environment and the community?

"If it brings in migrant labor, for example, what are the impacts on infrastructure and education?" he asked. "Finding this kind of balance is the core of sustainability."

Hashimoto described the balancing act during the Western SARE Hawaii Subregional Conference in Kona, attended by more than 100 Hawaii farmers, ranchers and ag-support personnel Sept. 23-24.



DeWitt

Jerry DeWitt, director of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture in Ames, Iowa, and conference moderator, described the purpose of the conference as a listening session in which the input from attendees will determine what SARE should do in the next 20 years.

In SARE's first 20 years, DeWitt said, the USDA program has learned that:

- Farmers' ideas are important.
- Farmers are teachers – we don't have all the answers at the land grants.
- Farmers can make a difference.
- On-farm research is valuable.
- Farmers have a voice and a vote at the table, although new voices must be brought to that table.

Dewitt also listed challenges on the horizon for which SARE must be prepared:

- On-farm energy use and conservation – "The face of agriculture will change because of energy, and we have to redesign our thinking."
- Marketing – How can we be creative to find new ways to market.
- Local food systems – "One of the main forces driving agriculture is the relationship between food and health, what we grow and how we grow it."
- Family farms and profitability – "How do we preserve, honor and value the heritage of the family farm?"
- Value-added agriculture – Instead of adding value to be accumulated out of state or country, how do we add it for ourselves?
- The multi-functionality of agriculture – It's not just food and fiber, but other values: soil preservation, aesthetics, community stability.

"We promise to listen to you," he said. "This journey of the next 20 years begins today."

Three keynote speakers from Hawaii offered their own perspectives on the challenges for sustaining Hawaii agriculture.

Richard Ha, Hamakua Springs Country Farm on the Big Island, emphasized the importance of energy for not just for agriculture but for all in Hawaii.



Ha

"Everything for our lifestyle is based on energy," Ha observed, urging harnessing all forms of energy, including sun, wind, ocean and geothermal. "At this point we can't afford to turn away any opportunity that comes before us."

Ed Boteilho, who operates Cloverleaf Dairy on the Big Island, had his irrigation water cut two years ago during an island earthquake, which reemphasized the importance of water to Hawaii agriculture.



Boteilho

"Agriculture has not been our (state's) priority, but it has to be," said Boteilho. "We're not going to be eating houses or people, we're going to be eating food, so we need to work with our legislators to be sure we have water."

Gary Maunakea-Forth, who runs the nonprofit Ma'o Organic Farm on the Waianae Coast of Oahu, sees Hawaii's ag future in its youth.



Maunakea-Forth

"We grow organic food and young leaders. We co-produce food to eat and the culture in which food is produced," he said. "Waianae has the highest food insecurity in the state of Hawaii. How does a rural community be rural if it's not in agriculture?"

During 11 tabletop discussions, nearly 900 individual comments were recorded during the first day. These were refined the next morning during further discussions. A delegate from each table then offered a report to the Western SARE Administrative Council. Here is a sampling of delegate observations:

Jerry Ross cited a need to educate a broad range of constituents about the importance of sustaining agriculture, including consumers, youth, legislators and farmers themselves. It's especially important, he said, to educate the next generation of farmers.

"We need to elevate agriculture to a noble and profitable status," said Ross. "Being a farmer is a noble profession."



Ross



Teves

Glen Teves emphasized the importance of land and water.

"Landowners in Hawaii are not committed to dedicating their land to agriculture," he said, suggesting this bit of leverage: "You don't get water unless you dedicate land to agriculture."



Matsushima

Susan Matsushima, noting the many conference participants had never heard of SARE, urged SARE to do a better job of getting information to the grassroots producer level. She also cited the need for improved relations in the agricultural community.

"Farmers need to work together. If you're not going to work together, you're not going to survive."

Matsushima also encouraged partnerships with the land-grant university, which needs to train more people to assist farmers.

Claire Sullivan said public policy should promote both local production and local consumption. It should also emphasize the importance of family farms. She suggested that the definition of "family farm" could be broadened to encompass an entire community. As a means of reaching underserved farmers and ranchers, Sullivan suggested providing "incentives to university and extension staff who collaborate with the underserved."



Sullivan

Rich von Wellsheim said more education and outreach can help government officials understand the importance of the local food supply.

He cited the need to conduct research at the whole-farm level, instead of being narrowly focused, and on using local inputs for fertilizer.

"We have a huge amount of biomass," said von Wellsheim, "yet we import fertilizer, so we need to look at how to use that biomass."



Takeyama

Wayne Takeyama said Hawaii needs to adopt as policy the "political will to improve its agriculture," and should include education of all residents about agriculture, from birth to retirement.

"We can do a better job with education to get information to customers and the public," he said. "And we should educate our children with things like school gardens."

Doug McClure agreed that education is a top priority. "We need to educate our kids, the consumers of the future," said McClure. "We need to educate our farmers so they know what's available in research, the best practices. We need to educate consumer to support local agriculture.

"We need to educate our city councils, and we need to educate our legislators to support us – sometimes that doesn't always happen."



McClure

McClure also recommended developing local SARE chapters.

"A lot of people simply don't know what SARE is," he said.