



Western SARE Conference in Kona

Participants Offer Their Thoughts On Sustaining Hawaii's Agriculture

Nearly 900 individual comments were elicited during 11 tabletop discussions the first day of the conference in Kona. These comments, in response to **six burning questions (at right)**, were refined the next morning during further roundtable discussions. A delegate from each table then offered a report to the Western SARE Administrative Council. The reports addressed a wide range of ideas on sustaining Hawaii agriculture. Here is a sampling of delegate observations:

Gerry Ross

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

Ross suggested that SARE cultivate better connections between farmers and

1. What will be needed to create stronger local and regional food systems that are less reliant on imports from elsewhere?
2. What are the local and regional consumption and production trends in your local area?
3. The SARE program was commissioned, by Congress, to get its research results to the farmer and rancher. Why has this been a success or failure in your specific subregion?
4. What type of research, education and development projects will be necessary over the next 10 years to help economically sustain farming and the environment?
5. If Western SARE received (from Congress) an additional \$1 million per region, what types of projects should be targeted or emphasized?
6. How can we (Western SARE) overcome barriers that may prevent underserved groups, including socially disadvantaged groups, from applying for and receiving SARE funding?

researchers, and that it work to improve outreach through the media.

The program should also focus on finding ways to reduce farm inputs, protect bees and support traditional food systems.

"We need to farm in a way that adapts to the local ecosystem," he said.

Glen Teves



Teves

Teves emphasized the importance of land and water.

"Landowners in Hawaii are not committed to dedicating their land to agriculture," he said, suggesting the use of leverage: "You don't get water unless you dedicate land to agriculture. The state needs to take control and commit to agriculture."

He observed that Hawaii, given its climate and other similarities to U.S protectorates like the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, belongs more in SARE's southern region than it does in SARE's western region.

Teves said that it's critical for Hawaii to find locally generated alternative sources of fertilizer, for example, using byproducts from the fish and livestock industries. Likewise, it needs to find alternative crop varieties that require fewer inputs. "A lot of the varieties we plant are bred for high input," he said.

Teves suggested that more grants be directed to producers, and he urged Western SARE to assist grant recipients with post-project management, especially helping them disseminate information about the results to producers and educators.

Susan Matsushima



Matsushima

Matsushima, a former chair of the Western SARE Administrative Council, noted that many conference participants had never heard of SARE. And she urged Western SARE to do a better job of getting information to producers as well as doing a better job of educating people at all levels, including grade school students and consumers.

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

She also encouraged a focus on local food production and consumption:

“People should buy local and know where their food comes from. There should be more food grown locally by people you know.”

She added that Western SARE, being the largest and most diverse of SARE’s regions, needs more money to travel the greater distances. And it should support the translation of the materials it produces for minorities.

Claire Sullivan

Sullivan said public policy should be crafted to promote an increase in local production and consumption. Policy should also emphasize the importance of family farms.

“We should focus on integrated and family farms,” she suggested, adding that the definition of ‘family farm’ could be broadened to encompass an entire community.



Sullivan

Sullivan also urged that SARE use local media outlets to increase people’s awareness about SARE grant results and to provide information about things like farm fertility and financial management. A helpful ploy would be to provide producers with examples of what other producers are doing successfully.

As a means of reaching underserved farmers and ranchers, Sullivan suggested providing “incentives to university and extension staff who collaborate with the underserved.”

Mary Sky

Sky said SARE should fund more small grants, and it should support ‘strategic planning grants’ to help local communities accommodate farming.

She also urged more research on seeds and plant varieties adapted specifically to the tropical environment.

She said socially disadvantaged groups should be



Sky

targeted with grants specific to their needs, for example, finding ways to encourage gleaning, providing healing gardens for both victims and perpetrators of violence and providing prisoners with opportunities to farm.



von Wellsheim

Rich von Wellsheim

von Wellsheim emphasized the need for education at all levels – legislators, consumers and students.

“You need education and outreach so government officials understand the importance of a local food supply,” he said.

He suggested that more research be conducted on land and water issues and on the use of local farm inputs, especially 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.”

He also advised widening the research view to whole-farm systems.

“Much of the work looks at the narrow focus,” he said. “We need to look at the big picture.”



Davenport

David Davenport

David said education on food should embrace the practical – develop a garden at every school and bolster school lunch programs with local produce and other food products from Hawaii.

“How can we expect locals to buy local if our government goes to the Mainland for food?” he asked.

He said that if legislators and regulators were to fast for a few days, it might give them an idea about the importance of having a local food supply.

He said lawmakers and enforcers need to focus on the importance of land and water as it relates to agriculture. In addition, he suggested:

- Make land available to people to help them get started in agriculture.
- Grind up trees and bushes for mulch instead of dumping them into landfills.
- Inventory Hawaii’s natural resources to enhance the production of things that are already here.



Takeyama

Wayne Takeyama

As did others, Takeyama emphasized the importance of educating the public about agriculture:

- Farmers can do a better job of providing information to their customers through farmers markets and community supported agriculture.
- Children can be educated with things like school gardens.
- Consumers can be educated on how to use products grown by Hawaii farmers.

"We need education on food from birth to retirement," he said.

Takeyama added that the state needs to adopt a policy that emphasizes the "political will to improve its agriculture."

James Leary

Leary suggested that an agricultural education program could be introduced into schools to develop a strategy for encouraging careers in agriculture.



Leary

Citing the increase in dining out, Leary observed that that benefits farmers who can capitalize on restaurant marketing, but it detracts from local families learning how to use local produce in their diets.

He said the local consumers need to be educated not only in how to prepare local produce, but also with the idea that it may be important to invest more household income on food as a way to ensure taste and quality.

He also cited the need to focus on finding and using local sources of fertilizer. And he said solutions must be found to the negative impacts of varroa mites on island bee populations, which he noted is a concern worldwide.

Diane Ley

Ley emphasized improving the linkages between farmers and communities. Providing education on food and agriculture in grades K-12 could be an important element in achieving that goal.

She also encouraged research on whole-farm systems – integrating economy, people and environment.

"We need more sustainable inputs for local farms," she said, adding that in addition to producing more local foods, there is a need to produce more local farm inputs. A tropical demonstration farm could help.

She observed that Western SARE has proved to be a good resource for bringing attention to alternative agricultural research to Hawaii, but it could do a better job of disseminating information.

"This conference is a huge success in bringing the message about sustainable agriculture."

She advised that Western SARE give extra points to minority grant applicants and that it provide more money for publications and outreach.



Ley

Doug McClure

McClure agreed that education is a top priority, not only for consumers but also for farmers.

"We need to educate our kids, the consumers of the future," he said, "and we need to educate our farmers so they know what's available in research and best practices."

What's more, greater support is needed for local agriculture.

"We need our legislators to support us, and that doesn't always happen. We need to educate our county councils. Finding affordable ag land that will grow good crops is important. We need to protect land and water for agriculture and avoid housing that takes land and water from farming."



McClure

McClure noted a surge in demand for local products as evidenced by the success of farmers markets. He said that as demand increases for locally produced beef, chicken and pork, the capacity to slaughter and process these animals needs to be increased.

McClure also recommended developing local SARE chapters. "A lot of people simply don't know what SARE is," he said.

Responses from the Western SARE Administrative Council members attending the conference follow:

Karl Kupers

Kupers, past chair of the Western SARE Administrative Council, cited the importance of the comments of UH ag dean Andy Hashimoto at the beginning of the conference: fostering balance among economics, environment and communities is needed to achieve sustainability.

"You need to work together," he said.

Kupers noted that SARE is not the only source of funding for agricultural research. Many other grants are available, and people should look for other partnerships to assist with funding. He also observed that 'local food' is trumping 'organic food,' and that producers and their supporter professionals should focus on that trend. He was especially struck by the report that there is only a four-day supply of food in the islands.



Kupers

He said he liked the 'community farm' concept.

"We often talk about whole-farm systems," said Kupers, "but it's important to talk about the community as a system. I'm going to remember that."

He also liked the idea of school gardens.

"I don't know how you better educate a young person than to plant a seed and watch it grow."

Other points that struck him included:

- Strategies for careers in agriculture.
- Reestablishing linkages between farmers and consumers.
- Integrating environment, people and economics.
- The idea of local SARE chapters at the state or county level.

Chuck Boerner

Boerner, an organic farmer from Hana, Maui, said he would like to see more innovative, high quality grant applications coming from Hawaii, and he urged his fellow island farmers to contact him if they have ideas for, or questions about, grant applications.

He said he was impressed with suggestions about bees, fertility, ag education and marketing.



Boerner

Boerner, who has been on the Western SARE Administrative Council since 2007, said SARE is the best government program he's seen.

"SARE treats farming as a noble profession," he said. "It treats farmers as kings."

Rick Melnicoe

Melnicoe, coordinator of the Western Region IPM program, which includes Hawaii, noted that SARE can't serve everyone, but there are programs like his that can also fund ag research and education grants.

"Give me a call if you are interested in grant opportunities, and I will give you feedback on where your application might fit in," he said.



Melnicoe

He acknowledged that there are things that the SARE program could improve, including encouraging better collaboration between producers and researchers as well as better outreach of funded grant results.

Stacie Clary

Clary, president-elect of the Western SARE Administrative Council, said she liked several ideas that emerged during the conference, including building research on traditional food systems and building 'political will' by educating and putting pressure on legislators and other elected officials.



Clary

"I have listened to your responses and priorities and I will take them back to the AC creatively, thinking outside the box, to respond." She added that she planned to take some of the ideas back to her own organization – the Ecological Farming Association in California.

"Thanks for taking two days of your time," said Clary, "to have faith in us to listen to your ideas."

Cindy Lair

Lair, an AC member from Colorado representing the Western Association of State Departments of Agriculture, urged conference participants to think about grant writing.

"When you send an application to SARE you can be assured that it is respected and treated well. But it's also a competitive process, so



Lair

applications are not always funded,” she said. “Don’t take that negatively, but see how you can reshape your application for resubmission.”

Lair, who serves on the National SARE Outreach Steering Committee, asked participants to provide her with feedback on how to better spend dollars for outreach on sustainable agriculture – whether to expand outreach to consumers or to focus on outreach to producers.

Peg Perreault

Perreault of Colorado represents EPA on the Council. She observed that conference participants clearly see education, especially among youth K-12, as an overarching concern. She said that as the producer population ages, it’s more important than ever to provide education about food and agriculture.



Perreault

“Western SARE relies on cooperative extension for help communicating its programs, but extension is overextended,” she said, so SARE must shoulder some of the educational effort.

She also noted that participants placed a big emphasis on organic production, but she emphasized that SARE serves all of agriculture, not just organic.

Open Microphone Session

To conclude the conference, participants were offered a chance to offer parting comments. Among them were these:

Ken Love

Love urged a revitalization of research centers in Hawaii.

“We’ve got to do more research, but not at the expense of traditional foods. We need a place for small-farm research on traditional foods. A strong ag center and a strong small-farm community will make for a stronger community overall.”



Love

Dennis Morihiro

Morihiro, a beekeeper from Maui, said he's concerned about the forest ecology of the islands.

"We need to focus on our forests and conduct research on why we are losing them to deforestation," he said, expressing grave concern about forest loss to pastures and housing development.



Morihiro

Mark Thorne

Thorne expressed concern that agricultural education in public school grades K-12 has been de-emphasized in recent years, and, in schools where it's still taught, it's "been relegated to the troublemakers."

"I think SARE has a valuable role to play in the education of our youth," said Thorne. "If the department of education doesn't turn around its perspective, we're going to lose our agriculture."



Thorne

Glenn Shinsato

Shinsato urged his fellow agricultural producers to, at the very least, act like they are important.

"I want to make a profit on my farm. To make a profit is not bad. I want to be sustainable so I can make money for a long time."



Shinsato

Susan Matsushima

Matsushima emphasized that the stature of agriculture in the islands must be raised to a more prominent position in the minds of consumers and government.

"We need to treat agriculture with the same reverence as tourism," she said. "We need to support agriculture in Hawaii to keep us alive and well. We need to take that message and lobby really hard on behalf of Hawaii agriculture."



Matsushima