



Testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources

Field Hearing to examine opportunities for federal and non-federal partnerships in integrated water management and efforts to improve water security in Hawai'i

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Submitted by David Y. Ige, Governor, State of Hawai'i

As an island state, Hawai'i is completely dependent on internal sources for our supply of fresh, clean water. There are no nearby states from which we can draw to meet our fresh water needs for drinking and agriculture.

Our rainforests play a critical role in the capture and storage of water. Our forests, particularly the Hawaiian koa-ōhi'a rainforests, capture moisture from the trade winds and allow it to soak slowly through layers of trees and ferns and mosses, into our streams and aquifers. When the forests are healthy, our water source is secure and clean. When damaged by invasive species or fire or disease or loss of species, the forest loses its integrity and water-capturing capability. That's why a major component of my administration's Sustainable Hawai'i Initiative focuses on watershed protection.

During the World Conservation Congress held in Honolulu last month, I made an ambitious commitment to the global community to protect 30% of Hawai'i's priority watershed forests by 2030. Currently, 15% of these priority watershed forests are protected.

We can only reach this goal – and go beyond it – through public-private partnerships of landowners and managers who recognize that the best way to protect our forested watersheds and the source of our fresh water is through collaborative management across landscapes. Watershed Partnerships are voluntary public-private alliances that allow us to steward native forested watersheds without regard to boundaries. Hawai'i has 10 active Watershed Partnerships covering 2.2 million acres – roughly half the land in the entire state. They are helping to plan, identify funding, and carry out the dedicated, hard, on-the-ground work that is necessary to combat threats to our forests.

In addition to working with the Watershed Partnerships, Hawai'i has adopted specific policies to protect our water at its source. This year the Legislature passed and I signed Act 172 establishing a two-year pilot program for a water security advisory group to establish public-private partnerships that increase water security, including increasing groundwater recharge.

Federal funding for on-the-ground forest protection by or through the Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the National Park Service, along with research conducted by the United States Geological Service, is absolutely critical to these efforts. We sincerely appreciate the support of the federal agencies that allows us to stay on track to fund and accomplish watershed forest protection.

Effective forest management means we have the basic infrastructure and stewardship in place to control the core threats to Hawai'i's forests. Currently, our greatest threat is a fungal disease called Rapid 'Ōhi'a Death on Hawai'i Island. The 'ohi'a is the most abundant native tree in the state of Hawai'i. It is the core structure of our native forested watersheds. The 'ohi'a provides habitat for many native species, and the spiritual and cultural importance of this tree in and to the Hawaiian culture is beyond compare. This fungal disease is currently killing thousands of 'ōhi'a trees on Hawai'i Island, so far engulfing over 50,000 acres.

We have established a Rapid 'Ōhi'a Death Working Group made up of numerous public and private partners including our federal partners. This group's work is key to advancing research into the causes and extent of the disease, and pilot field projects to seek ways to contain the spread of the disease.

This is not the only threat to our forests, which are comprised of native and endangered species. Hawai'i is home to one-third of the endangered species listed in the nation. Forty-nine new species were added to Hawai'i's list of endangered species this year alone, some of which may have been avoided if adequate funding had been available in the past.

Increased Fish and Wildlife Service endangered species funds, in addition to the proposed "Recovering America's Wildlife Act", can provide urgently needed support for our endangered plants and wildlife and their habitats.

In addition, reauthorization of the Land and Water Conservation Fund will be critical to protecting high priority lands, including watershed lands, from changes in use that would destroy their natural function.

I thank the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources for this opportunity to focus on the threats to and potential support for our native forested watersheds, the source of life here in the Hawaiian Islands.

When the Polynesian people arrived in these islands, they maintained a close connection to the land and sea. They practiced a form of natural resource management that was based on the interrelationship of elements and human beings, including their spiritual beliefs. By exercising careful stewardship, they were able to support a robust population.

Today, our State's Constitution says that "All public natural resources are held in trust by the State for the benefit of the people." The Constitution requires us to conserve and protect Hawai'i's natural beauty and all natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations.

We appreciate your support as we continue to work with our federal and private-sector partners to ensure that we meet our public-trust obligations.