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Hawaii's food insecurity: Hawaii Farm Bureau cites land needs, dubious policies

By Randy Cabral

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While Hawaii's farmers and ranchers welcome Gov. David Ige's new emphasis on agriculture, evidenced by his call to double local food production by 2030, it's important to be realistic.

First, we need to focus on what we do best. While we can produce more tropical fruit, taro, beef, fish, breadfruit and vegetables, we can't meet all our food needs. The islands simply cannot compete with producers who enjoy lower production costs and greater efficiency of scale.

One of the biggest challenges we face is labor. Like agriculture the world over, we're experiencing a shortage of workers, and island food crop production isn't easily mechanized. Our farmers are aging, and there aren't a lot of young people coming in to take over. The desire may be there, but the capital investment required is not.

Though we hear a lot of talk about farming, it's not translating into committed bodies on the land. Instead, we hear romanticized ideas about how we should be farming that don't

match the reality of food production in the islands.

People must remember that agriculture is a business, based on profit and loss. Unless it's profitable, no one will pursue it. Right now, our most profitable farms are producing seeds, coffee, macadamia nuts and other high-value export crops. To make local food production more viable, legislative and policy fixes are needed that will increase availability of state land through reasonably-priced, long-term leases that give ag producers the security needed to invest in farming. Training and guidance through university agricultural extension agents, especially for new farmers, is also crucial.

The Legislature and administration need to continue to address water- allocation issues, to ensure that large and small producers have consistent, long-term access to affordable water. Maintaining dams, reservoirs and irrigation systems is another factor in that equation.

Local food production can be boosted through public and private investments in slaughterhouses, processing and packing facilities and other infrastructure needed to get ag products to consumers.

Hawaii farmers are struggling to meet new, unfunded federal and market-driven mandates, such as the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). We may lose 30 to 40 percent of our small farms because they can't afford to comply with that law. They're likely going to need some state help to stay in business.

In recent years, Hawaii farmers have been discouraged by the gentrification and development of prime ag land, anti-agriculture activism and attempts to create divisiveness around conventional, organic and GMO production. We may be able to deal with insects, diseases, storms and droughts. But it's very hard for us to constantly respond to complaints,

demands and unfounded allegations from people with no real understanding of local production on a commercial scale.

We've got to end this divisiveness, which is largely driven by ignorance and ideology. We are going to need each and every farm and ranch in Hawaii — and many more — to meet the governor's goal.

We also need greater support from the public and government. Less than 1 percent of the state budget goes to the Hawaii Department of Agriculture. It needs more funding, and we need a prominent place at the table when policy makers are talking about land, water and regulations related to farming. This is our area of expertise. Many of us have devoted our entire lives to the land. We're part of the community. Following safe and resource-protective practices keep us and ag thriving in Hawaii.

Meeting the governor's food production goal is possible — if folks start listening to island farmers and ranchers.