

[Editorial](#) | [Insight](#)

# Hawaii's food insecurity: Farmer's daughter says tough industry needs fact-based support

By Joni Kamiya

September 18, 2016

So there's a lot of talk about how we're going to double our local food supply by 2030. That sounds like a lofty goal when you realize that over 90 percent of our food is imported and there's less than 2 percent of the population growing food. What will it really take to make this happen?

With an abundance of food available, the public is fortunate to have so many choices. One can buy apples at \$2.99 a pound or locally grown papayas for \$1.89 a pound. Very few people will blink an eye when they see their favorite apple back in season and in the store and think nothing of paying the higher price. However, when papaya prices go up a mere \$0.10, many will balk and complain of the increases. There's an assumption by the consumer that locally grown foods should cost less, which is erroneous, given our cost of doing business in Hawaii.

Farming is a business. When gas prices go up, the costs of our supplies go up also but we don't always raise the price and must absorb extra expenses to do business. When the weather goes bad and our yields go down, we don't raise the

price either so we must forgo our income many times to pay our workers first since that's required by law.

Farming incurs so many costs just to get started — and given the risks, very few people can afford to start, let alone continue given the variances in costs. The small, food-growing farmers are at a significant disadvantage with staying in business given the false assumptions held by the public that limits their economic flexibility to stay afloat.

Not only do we need to consider the public's perceptions on local agriculture, but we must also consider the systems in place to help farmers. Tools are needed against pests and disease to stay competitive, which is where we need a robust research and development program at university to meet their specifications. As a land grant college, that is the mission of the University of Hawaii: to help them with those issues. There also needs to be ways to educate farmers on the business aspects, integrated pest management, marketing and other programs to help get their product to the consumer. Simply giving land and lending programs to farmers will not improve the situation. More comprehensive support programs that are systemic in nature are more than likely to produce more farmers.

Growing more in Hawaii will mean we have to grow people to learn and appreciate this kind of lifestyle and work. Study those farmers who have been in it their entire lifetime. These people are the true models of being committed to what they do and are willing to take on these tough, dirty jobs that few are willing to do.

Growing food has really become their passion; it's what keeps them going even when things take a turn for the worse. These individuals will pick themselves up and start all over again. Farming is one of the oldest professions in society and yet it has become so demonized by those with no attachment to it.

When social media is filled with terrible things that farmers allegedly do, where's the incentive for anyone to raise their hand to take on that challenge? We can't cultivate more farmers if we continue to have a disregard for facts and truth about agriculture.

If we really want to grow more local food in Hawaii, we as a state have to work together on this goal, and start to agree on the facts and be committed to standing with it.

Relying upon misinformation and emotions like fear to dictate policies will have too many unintended consequences and keep us from reaching any goal of food security and sustainability.

We need fact-based policies when it comes to doubling food production. If we can't change that and refuse to learn, Gov. David Ige's proclamation will only remain a political pipe dream that is never fulfilled. Let's start the conversation to bring aloha back to the farmers in our communities and move forward from there.