

Q&A with Jerry Ornellas



By Joan Conrow

A lifelong Kauai farmer, Jerry Ornellas was introduced to the challenges and rewards of agriculture on his father's dairy farm. He still farms on family land in Kapaa Homesteads, growing lychee and longan, and collecting taro varieties.

As a veteran advocate for farmers, Ornellas has successfully navigated the disparate landscapes of commercial farm and Hawai'i politics. He serves as the Kauai representative on the state Board of Agriculture, and has long held a leadership role in Kauai Farm Bureau, where he is currently vice president. A tireless champion for the maintenance of irrigation systems that serve agriculture, he's on the board of the East Kauai Water Users Cooperative. He is also a popular pundit at conferences and events. Jerry's message is typically underscored by his enduring optimism for the future of agriculture in Hawai'i.

Kauai journalist and blogger Joan Conrow caught up with Jerry pau lychee season to conduct this interview for Farmers & Friends.



CONROW: *We often hear a lot of doom and gloom about the state of ag in Hawaii. Why are you optimistic?*

ORNELLAS: *We've got such a gap between what we consume and what we produce here in Hawaii. That's a good jumping off point. We've got room to grow in replacing those imports. If we can replace even 10 percent over 20 years, that would be huge for Hawaii. We're spending \$3.3 billion annually on imported food. That's on par with what we import for energy. I'm a systems thinker—and energy is directly related to ag costs.*

*There's also an argument on 'can we feed ourselves?' and I think we can. If Hawaiians could do it without modern tools, then I believe we can do it. No question we're going to have to change our diets and that could be a good thing. We can start by replacing wheat and corn with sweet potatoes, taro, breadfruit and possibly soybeans, to produce tofu, a good protein source. It's a really tall order, because people don't like to change. But from a theoretical viewpoint, it's do-able. We have the resources to do it, as far as land and water. Whether we have the political will is another story. *(continued next page)**

CONROW: *Are you seeing evidence of that political will?*

ORNELLAS: Well, on Oahu, we see the state buying the Galbraith lands and taking a close look at the Dole lands. We need to do that on the Neighbor Islands and see if we can secure large contiguous parcels. There's nothing wrong with private ownership, but for private owners who wants to sell, we can look at buying them.

CONROW: *What should we be focusing on in agriculture right now?*

ORNELLAS: We waste a lot of water, both agricultural and municipal. Our systems for transporting water are antiquated. I can see us moving away from open ditches into more piped irrigation. It's an expensive proposition, but as water gets more expensive, it'll be cost-effective. It's a thorny issue politically because most water systems are subsidized somehow, and subsidizing business is a hard sell to an urban public. But if you're producing food, that's another story. I'm not sure farmers can afford the true cost of water.

We also have to take into consideration what the future holds, with climate change.

A key is returning our agriculture to profitability and that will attract the young people. Until that happens, we're going to struggle.

CONROW: *How can farmers get money to start or expand an operation today?*

ORNELLAS: Most banks are not inclined to finance agricultural operations simply because of the risk and the rate of return. But there are alternative monies — federal loans and HDOA loans to established and first-time farmers. I don't see capital as a really huge hurdle. The department [of Agriculture] has a pretty well-functioning revolving loan account.

CONROW: *If money isn't a problem, what is limiting agriculture in Hawaii?*

ORNELLAS: Marketing is a big hurdle; creating demand for local products is really where we need to focus our energy. A good example is breadfruit. It's a great product, but very little demand. Even chefs aren't using it. I always prefer the private initiative, but farmers don't have resources and expertise. They're price-takers, not price-makers, so marketing may need to be picked up by a state initiative. We need to start by identifying demand for local markets. We're going to saturate the farmers' markets at some point, and it's a major source of income for many farmers. *(continued on next page)*



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CONROW: *You've been a Kauai farmer for more than half-a-century, which gives you a really good historical perspective. What are some of the major shifts that influenced modern agriculture in Hawaii, aside from the decline of the sugar and pineapple plantations?*

ORNELLAS: The major shift came in the late '50s, early '60s, with the advent of refrigerated containerized cargo and jet travel. In the past, Hawaii only shipped in commodities like wheat, rice and animal food. But with refrigerated cargo, we could get California produce to Hawaii relatively quickly and inexpensively, so we lost our competitive edge. Jet travel led to mass tourism in Hawaii, which created a job market for farmers and agricultural workers. It's often easier to work in hotels than fields. And with the rise of tourism, we saw a huge rise in construction and other sectors, so labor became a problem. Those are still issues we deal with today.

CONROW: *People produced most of their own food back in the day. Do you see a resurgence of that?*

ORNELLAS: When you had time to do that it was great. When you work two jobs, how are you going to have time to raise a nice garden, a few pigs, chicken, cattle? In the rural areas, they still do that. But people now spend most of their time at work. We struggle to define ourselves in Hawaii as rural versus urban, the townies versus the country guys.

CONROW: *So is the future of ag on Oahu, the Neighbor Islands or both?*

ORNELLAS: Oahu is ramping up its ag production, but also losing its ag lands. Traditionally, the model was the Neighbor Islands, being more rural, would grow the food and ship it to Oahu. But no county is more dependent on tourism than Kauai. That wasn't the case even a few decades ago, when ag was the driver. I still see the potential of Neighbor Islands feeding Oahu, but that's not what's happening. The markets are on Oahu, so if you can produce there, you have a tremendous competitive advantage over someone who is shipping in. It's the same with

imported inputs. Oahu can get them cheaper because they're shipped there first. Oahu also has a large immigrant population and many are involved in ag. I don't see it as Oahu versus the Neighbor Islands, but Oahu does have advantages.

CONROW: *What impact is gentrification — turning ag land into “gentleman's estates” — having on farming?*

ORNELLAS: It obviously has a huge impact on local ag. It's driving up the cost of land for one thing, and it's not always compatible. Everyone wants to live in the country, but not necessarily next to a farmer. It's changing the complexion of our rural areas, and not in a good way. These people often have a very idealized view of what living in the country is all about. The reality is a lot different. Having farms embedded in our community is going to be a big issue. It already is, with the call for setbacks and buffer zones. For the smaller farmers, that's not do-able. Again, this goes back to political will and proper land management.

CONROW: *You always say you're happiest on the farm. Why have you gotten involved in the political aspects of farming?*

ORNELLAS: It was a matter of survival. Farmers for the most part are a-political. They just want to farm. They want to be left alone. They're not activists. If their livelihood is threatened, some are going to be more active. Here's the real sea change: In 1960, 70 percent of the population was people born in Hawaii. Today it's about 50 percent. The newcomers have changed the political landscape. They often have an idealized vision of what ag should be, but they have a shallow understanding of how ag works. And once they get here, they don't want anyone else to come! So just like that influx is driving up the cost of housing, it's driving up the cost of doing ag.

CONROW: *As Kauai Farm Bureau president, speaking in support of all ag, you took a lot of heat during the debate over Bill 2491, the island's pesticide/GMO regulatory law that was overturned by the courts. What was that like?*

ORNELLAS: I've never seen anything like it in all my years of politics on Kauai. I've never seen that level of polarization. How did it go from six people holding signs in front of Safeway to 2,000 people marching on Rice Street two years later? How did that happen? I suspect social media had a lot to do with it. People with strong agendas who will do almost anything to see those

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move forward. Political apathy on the part of the public also had a lot to do with it, not being well-informed enough to counter some of the claims.

CONROW: *How did you deal with the personal attacks?*

ORNELLAS: It's discouraging to be cast as the bad guy. Farmers always have the image of themselves as the good guys, because they produce food for people. It's discouraging to be accused of not caring about the land, the water, the community, or what we do.

CONROW: *How are farmers responding to the attacks on their activities and operations?*

ORNELLAS: Some have pulled back and some want to set the record straight about this is what we do in the community because so many people lack the historical perspective of how ag has shaped Hawaii economically and socially. It was ag that brought us to this dance and now I'm not sure we even have a partner.

CONROW: *How do you see Hawaii moving past the polarization that has developed around GMOs and conventional farming?*

ORNELLAS: It depends on how long the public's attention will be focused on these issues. The persistence of this particular issue has surprised a lot of people. Generally we move on, but that's not the case here. We're so polarized now, I don't know how we're going to heal. Once you get into court, you lose a lot of your options. When it's in the hands of the courts and the lawmakers, it adds to the complexities of resolving it. Then it's no longer taking place on the community level. It becomes a larger playing field.

CONROW: *Have you given up on the political process, or decided to retreat?*

ORNELLAS: I'm a farmer and that's all I ever wanted to do. A lot of this is a huge distraction and it's taking me away from doing what I love to do, and that's farm. As far as my role going forward, I don't know. I'd love to get back to the farm. Meetings, hearings, as important as those are, that's not my mission in life, or what I even feel comfortable with. A lot of farmers feel that way. My obligations are to my family and my land. Those are my priorities. If there's time left over for politics, that's okay.

CONROW: *Should other farmers step up to the political plate?*

ORNELLAS: We definitely need farmers to be engaged and involved. But it's hard saying that because I sometimes feel that I need to disengage and get back to my farm. It's basically an individual choice. All politics are local, but we're dealing with global forces, so it's a little more complex than it used to be. At age 65, I'm kind of looking over my shoulder and saying, where are the guys that are gonna take our place? We've got to get the next generation involved and on the land.

CONROW: *Do you see that happening?*

ORNELLAS: No.

CONROW: *Yet you're still optimistic.*

ORNELLAS: We fed ourselves before and we can do it again. But is that our goal? To feed ourselves? Or to have a healthy robust agricultural sector and support one another? Ironically, we had a lot more diversified ag and even rice exports when we had all the sugar cane and pine. Why are we struggling today? There are a lot of unanswered questions.

CONROW: *So where to from here? Where do we start?*

ORNELLAS: We need to start in our own backyards and see what we can do there. ■



Longan



Lychee



Ulu

Jerry Ornellas grows longan, lychee and ulu (breadfruit) on his 15-acre farm at Kapaa, Kauai. Visit his farm at <http://www.kauaigrown.org/jerrys-farm>.