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The Hawaii Invasive Species Council

After more than ten years of collaborative work, this piece of legislation was passed by the 2003 Legislature and signed by Governor Lingle, creating the Hawaii Invasive Species Council (HISC). Section 3 (a) of SB 1505 which established the HISC states that, “There is established a temporary invasive species council for the special purpose of providing policy level direction, coordination, and planning among state departments, federal agencies, and international and local initiatives for the control and eradication of harmful invasive species infestations throughout the State and for preventing the introduction of other invasive species that may potentially be harmful.”

Most people don’t know the significance of the new HISC law, because few people are aware of the scope and types of issues that hamper the efforts of agencies in the mission to protect Hawaii from invasive pests.

These gaps in our invasive species protection measures were listed in separate reports conducted by The Nature Conservancy and the federal Office of Technology Assessment from the early 1990s. Both reports indicated that Hawaii has the worst invasive pest problem in the nation, and that one of the top reasons that the problem is so bad was that there were gaps in existing rules and agency mandates, conflicting mandates, ill-defined jurisdictions, and at times, a lack of planning to address new pests.

A second problem listed was the lack of communication between state and federal agencies, and even between agency departments and offices. A third major problem was the lack of public awareness of invasive species issues.

In an effort to address these three roadblocks to better protection, the Coordinating Group on Alien Pest Species (CGAPS) was formed, primarily through the efforts of Alan Holt of The Nature Conservancy. Members of every major agency and organization involved in invasive

species work participated in the quarterly meetings in an effort to change policy, improve communications and collaborations, and to work on a public awareness campaign.

In the ten years of CGAPS, there has been progress in some areas. A major success of CGAPS was the Silent Invasion media campaign, which included television commercials and specials, print ads, dramatic pamphlets, and community weed pulling trips for Operation Miconia. Also successful was the collaboration of agencies and individuals on projects with limited scope.

However, the problem of policy change remained since the participants of CGAPS were primarily management level, not executive level decision makers. In February 2003 CGAPS published an updated Summary of Findings and Recommendations for Invasive Species Prevention and Control. In it, CGAPS highlighted the need for agency chairs and other cabinet-level participation, leadership and commitment of each agency to address these problems.

The HISC directly addresses this need by requiring the director, chairperson, or their designated representative of the Departments of Business, Economic Development, and Tourism, Health, Transportation, Agriculture, Land and Natural Resources, along with the President of the University of Hawaii, federal agency representatives and others, to meet no less than twice each year. The council will be administratively attached to the office of the governor and will advise the governor and legislature on invasive species issues.

The act also requires the HISC to look at each agency's organizational and resource shortfalls. The reality of the shortfalls are stunning—the lack of funding for the Hawaii Department of Agriculture (HDOA) to conduct adequate inspections on incoming goods in appropriate facilities, the lack of funding and dedicated manpower to control any single Noxious Weed present in Hawaii, and the lack of money to pull Miconia from State forests in DLNR's care—the list goes on. While there is no funding attached to the HISC, it has been at least ten years since there has been a thorough accounting of needs.

The challenges of the HISC go beyond quick fixes. HISC members face the daunting task of looking at laws, policies and procedures that were set a generation or more ago, and setting systems that will protect Hawaii today and in the future, where global transportation of goods and pests will only increase. The policies of decades past cannot help us prevent the next silent invader, and changing our destiny requires leadership, commitment and public support for protecting Hawaii.

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