



COMMENTARY

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Much has been said in the news about our islands being reliant on imports for everything from gas, to toilet paper, building supplies, food, and more. Yet most people give little thought to the fact that as Hawaii imports more and more goods, those goods may carry invasive species that are bad for Hawaii.

There is a tremendous amount of incoming goods that need to be searched for invasive pests, and part of that job belongs to the Hawaii Department of Agriculture (HDOA). Yet HDOA lacks adequate funding to inspect domestic cargo and goods entering Hawaii for invasive species. The HDOA budget is less than 1% of the state budget, and the percentage moves up and down with the state budget—it has not risen with the amount of incoming goods that require inspection or quarantine services.

Two bills (companion bills HB 772, SB 1066) in the legislature aim to ensure a steady and appropriate source of funds for inspection and quarantine services. The bills propose that a reasonable service fee be charged to those importing cargo, to ensure that the amount of incoming cargo is commensurate with inspection and treatment costs.

Hawaii State legislators are understandably cautious about any bills that could be considered new taxes, even when the benefits of the proposed program far outweigh the potential costs to businesses, agriculture, tourism, the environment and our health and quality of life.

To explore the sentiments of Hawaii residents on the subject, a statewide phone survey was conducted in February 2007, and one of the questions asked if people would support a service fee for inspection and quarantine services. Survey participants were asked:

“Currently, the Hawaii Department of Agriculture is responsible for inspecting cargo and goods entering Hawaii for invasive or non-native species that might be harmful to our State’s native plants and animals. There is a proposal to charge a fee for inspecting services directly to those sending cargo so that funding for inspection and quarantine services can keep up with the rising amount of cargo entering Hawaii.”

Results show that people understand that adequate inspection services are necessary to prevent the next wiliwili gall wasp, coqui frog, or banana bunchy top virus. Three in four (74%)

respondents said that they would support a law that would allow the Department of Agriculture to charge an appropriate fee for inspecting incoming cargo and for quarantine services when applicable. *(Note: The margin of error for a sample of this size (n=500) is +/- 4.38 percentage-points with a 95% confidence level.)*

Discussions about this fee for service proposal have been going on over the past few years, and there are always concerns raised, including questions regarding the potential delay of items requiring inspection and the logistics of collecting such a fee.

Over the past several years the Hawaii Department of Agriculture has conducted a number of inspection “blitzes”, where virtually all incoming cargo is inspected to determine what types of cargo and commodities are prone to carry more invasive species. Although there have been concerns raised that increased inspection could slow down incoming goods, the information gained from these blitzes combined with an increase in number of inspectors could actually speed the process.

The reality of the situation is that if there is no fee to support additional inspectors and services, we will continue to play this game of biological roulette. Some of the worst invasive pests are not yet present in Hawaii. Will we be able to catch them before they invade our home? It is time we put our foot down and demand better support and protection for Hawaii.

(END)

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