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Hawaiian Electric donation to Ka‘ala Farm supports wildfire prevention, mitigation in Wai‘anae Kai

\$50,000 donation will help implement “shovel-ready” priority projects

HONOLULU, Oct. 26, 2021 – Hawaiian Electric has donated \$50,000 to Ka‘ala Farm for the Wai‘anae Kai Wildfire Prevention & Mitigation Project in support of community resilience and environmental stewardship in this culturally and ecologically significant area in West O‘ahu. The project is focused on implementing key land management practices that can prevent the frequency of fires and reduce their intensity and duration, increasing security in the upper valley, as well as improving the ability of firefighters to respond and extinguish fires quickly in the area.

“Wai‘anae has some of the highest wildfire ignition rates in the state due to episodic drought, frequent high winds and the expansion of nonnative grass and shrubs that fuel fires,” said Eric Enos, executive director of Ka‘ala Farm, a cultural and environmental education nonprofit serving the Wai‘anae community since 1976. The farm is situated on 100 acres of land in the back of Wai‘anae Valley and has become an integral part of connecting community members to ancestral knowledge of growing food and managing natural resources.

“Hawaiian Electric’s partnership in helping care for the Wai‘anae moku means “shovel-ready” priority projects – such as clearing vegetation, constructing firebreaks and managing animal grazing – can be implemented in the near-term,” added Enos.

Enos emphasized that nearly all wildfires in Hawai‘i are started by people whether intentionally or accidentally, and part of Hawaiian Electric’s donation will be used to address this issue.

“Ensuring pono access to mauka lands and reducing the potential for fire ignition by adding perimeter fencing and installing a gate in the upper valley will go a long way to inhibit the frequent, deliberate setting of fires by arsonists.”

“While wildfire mitigation is not a primary focus of Ka‘ala Farm, it’s admirable that Eric is spearheading this project and bringing dozens of organizations together in the effort since fire is a risk to the entire West O‘ahu area,” said Brandi Crabbe, Hawaiian Electric community relations manager.

Enos knows first-hand the devastation a wildfire can wreak after a 2018 blaze in the vicinity of Ka‘ala Farm scorched 9,000 acres in Wai‘anae and Mākaha. The blaze, caused by unknown persons, trapped Enos, his staff and a school group for several hours behind walls of flames and rising black smoke whipped by high winds.

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Eventually, everyone was evacuated by buses on a smoldering blackened road. No lives were lost in that fire but valuable agricultural lands were ruined. Enos realized that climate change would only exacerbate dry conditions in the Wai'anae moku, prompting the wildfire prevention and mitigation project.

In 2020, Enos joined with community leaders, state agencies, Hawaiian Electric and other stakeholders to form a wildfire mitigation hui that has been meeting monthly to collaborate on efforts in Wai'anae. Members also include the Wai'anae Agricultural Park farmers, Hawai'i Wildfire Management Organization, Hawai'i Department of Land & Natural Resources, University of Hawai'i and state Department of Education. Other partners working on the Wai'anae Kai project include the Wai'anae Mountain Watershed Partnership and the Health & Wellness Alliance.

In the future, Enos envisions the construction of a water tank, pond or reservoir to provide water for firefighting helicopters, installation of fire hydrants and pressurized waterlines at strategic locations and a sprinkler system to irrigate vegetative fire breaks, among other projects that will help first responders extinguish wildfires. A partial grant from the state is helping but not enough to cover the requested \$1 million that Enos applied for in 2019 to implement these projects.

To learn more about Ka'ala Farm or to donate to the Wai'anae Kai Wildfire Prevention & Mitigation Project, please call (808) 696-4954.



Wai'anae Kai, Aug. 2021

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