Hawai‘i fruit fly international symposium

Senator Daniel K. Akaka
Hawaii Fruit Fly International Symposium
Poipu Beach, Kauai
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Aloha.

Thank you for that kind introduction. I am pleased to see so many people here who are working so hard to address Hawaii's fruit fly infestation.

Hawaii has always opened its arms to welcome visitors of all kinds who travel to our shores. This is our spirit of "Aloha." And nowhere is this spirit more evident than right here on the Garden Isle.

However, there is one major exception to this rule. There is a visitor who has never been welcome, and has stayed too long. He holds the Guiness Book of World Records when it comes to overstaying his welcome. He arrived in 1895 and hasn't left since.

Of course, the unwelcome visitor I am speaking of is the fruit fly -- the melon fly, to be specific. His cousin, the medfly, arrived in 1907 and the oriental fly arrived in 1945. The last of his relatives, the malaysian fruit fly, showed up in 1983.

These are all unwelcome guests. I have no aloha for fruit fly. My only aloha for these visitors is the aloha that means "good-bye."

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Throughout my career in Congress, I have searched for ways to safely get rid of these pests. The trifly eradication program on Kauai got its start in 1985, when Congress agreed to my request and appropriated $340,000 for an eradication program designed to minimize the application of pesticides. Today, only five years later, funding for the program is ten times this amount. The project now is so complex that it requires a three-day symposium with 22 speakers to explain it in detail!

Because we understand the importance of this initiative to the agricultural and economic well-being of Hawaii, Senator Inouye and I have worked to create an ambitious program which has a good chance of success.

The program enjoys strong support within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Administrator of the Agricultural Research Service, Dr. Dean Plowman, and his predecessor, Dr. Kinney, have always taken a direct, personal interest in the eradication program. APHIS, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, has also made important contributions to the program.

Less than a year ago, Dr. Plowman came to Hawaii for a site visit and full-scale review of the Kauai project. I travelled with him, and can tell you that he was pleased with what he saw.

We were briefed on all aspects of the project, and witnessed the aerial and ground release of sterile med flies at the McBride coffee plantation. We overflew the Island to give Dr. Plowman a first-hand appreciation of the challenges of performing an eradication program in Kauai's rugged terrain. And we dedicated the Waimanalo sterile fly facility that is capable of rearing 500 million flies a week.

Shortly after he returned to Washington, Dr. Plowman appeared before our Appropriations Committee. He spoke of his visit to Kauai, and his optimism that eradication of the trifly complex was indeed possible.

He closed by telling our Committee how impressed he was with all of you here. He praised your dedication and commitment . . . because you are fighting this war on the ground and in the laboratory. Your efforts have made this project a reality. And he suggested an accelerated plan that would cut the time it takes to achieve eradication by five years. There's optimism for you!

The goal of the Kauai project is to demonstrate that entrenched populations of fruit flies can be eradicated from Kauai and Niihau in an environmentally sound manner. If we can eradicate the trifly complex from Kauai's challenging terrain, then we can eradicate these pests anywhere.

Great care and attention have been given to safeguarding non-target species from harm. Everyone recognizes that there is little point in proceeding with an initiative such as this if we do harm to our environment in the process.

But the rewards of success will be great indeed. And there will be important rewards for our environment as well as our economy. Hawaii has the unfortunate distinction of having the greatest per capita use of pesticides of any state in the nation. The presence of fruit flies is one reason we have such high pesticide use.

These pests wreak havoc on dozens of commercially grown crops in Hawaii. For many of our farmers, there simply is no alternative other than the use of pesticides if they hope to harvest a crop. Some of the more serious pesticide misuse problems involve backyard gardeners who will stop at almost nothing when it comes to getting rid of each and every fly that might sting their fruits and vegetables.

I see a day when the initiative you have begun here on Kauai will mean that farmers won't have their harvest ruined by future generations of fruit flies. And I look forward to the day when the environment won't face a steady onslaught from malathion and other pesticides commonly used on farms and gardens to keep this pest in check.

Another reason why this fruit fly initiative is so important is that agriculture in Hawaii is at a crossroads. Throughout the 20th century, sugarcane and pineapple have been the mainstay of Hawaiian agriculture. They have been the source of jobs, stability and growth.

Recently, however, diversified crops have captured an increasing share of the market. In 1966, diversified crops comprised only ten percent of agricultural production. Today, these crops account for more than one-fourth of our state's agriculture. These statistics attest to the gradual, but sustained diversification of agriculture in Hawaii.

Examples of this diversification abound. Here on Kauai, C. Brewer's guava plantation is a thriving success. Macadamia nut production is on the rise. And while McBride's ambitious plans for coffee production have not yet caused alarm among South American coffee growers, but just give the plantation time.

Certainly, sugar and pineapple will continue to dominate Hawaii's agricultural scene for the forseeable future. Recent experience has shown, however, that acreage in cane and pineapple may decline further in the coming years.

This does not mean we must be content to watch as our agricultural opportunities wane. On the contrary, the world is waiting for what Hawaiian agriculture has to offer.

Throughout Asia and the mainland, there lies a vast, multi-billion dollar market in tropical specialty crops -- a market which holds great opportunities for Hawaiian agriculture. Food marketing experts are constantly searching for dependable sources of "exotic" fruits and vegetables that will appeal to America's insatiable appetite for new taste sensations. There is strong demand for unique and improved varieties, many of which will command premium prices in the gourmet section of mainland and overseas supermarkets.

Without question, this is an opportunity that is "ripe for the picking," and Hawaii, with our ability to serve both Asian and North American markets, is uniquely situated to take advantage of this opportunity.

There is no secret about the success of a number of Hawaii crops which have become popular in markets around the world. These include macadamia nuts, papaya, ginger, guava and kona coffee.

But, we are only beginning to scratch the surface. Because of Hawaii's broad range of climates and soil conditions, almost any type of crop can be grown. However, our fruit fly infestation remains the greatest obstacle for agricultural growth in Hawaii. If agriculture in Hawaii is to explore new opportunities and achieve its true potential, this burden must be removed.

As I said, agriculture in Hawaii is at a crossroads. Those of us meeting here today are sowing the seeds for the agricultural opportunities of tomorrow. Because of your efforts, you give me hope that our grandchildren may never know what it is like to have their agricultural prospects dampened by these troublesome pests.

Mahalo. Thank you very much.