

October 6, 2009

Time for a Big Island Department of Agriculture

It does not get much thought from many of my friends in the ag community but my feeling is that its time for a Big Island Department of Agriculture. Their fear is that this department would become yet another drain on resources and become self-serving rather than serving the intended farming community. You know, kind of like the state department of AG. The fear is well founded.

<http://www.hawaii-county.com/directory/directory.htm> is a list of current county departments. For a topic as important as agriculture you would think there would be some reference. There is not a mention of the word agriculture. Instead, a number of departments are said to have a finger on the agricultural pulse of the country. The problem is the pulse is erratic with some and DOA with others. (And I don't mean Dept. of AG.) The Immigration office, Dept. of Water Supply, Planning Dept., Two offices within the Finance Dept., Environmental Management Dept. and the extremely popular with growers office of Research And Development (R&D) all touch agriculture as I suspect does the office of mayor and county council. There are numerous other county offices that might touch on agricultural issues that I've yet to examine.

The need to be more cohesive with island agricultural is as obvious as the need for much greater self-sustainability. There is a lot of waste as well as redundant efforts above, for example, labor and water issues. The proposal would be to take all agricultural and agri-tourism activities, ag tax, ag planning, ag environmental issues, and budgets away from all of these departments in order to begin to focus on what is best for the county's growers and residents. Centralizing county ag including that part of R&D would have the added benefit of being able to compete with the state for federal funds.

The state DOA has let down Big Island growers time and time again and we need to take charge of our own destiny. There are many examples of federal funds flowing to the state who, in turn gives it to the Farm Bureau for a grant distribution program. The results of these programs are generally a perfect example of how not to run a grant program. The program information is not forthcoming from the state or farm bureau. It does not filter down to the growers. Just 2 months ago the information & RFP was released August 1st with a deadline of August 7th 2009. Anyone who has ever had grant involvement knows that to prepare a proposal in 6 days is impossible and that to ask that of growers or agencies is simply absurd. Someone within the old-boy network had to have known the release of the RFP was imminent as I'm sure there were many applications submitted. This is wrong and might even go against different federal statutes but this is in Hawaii and business as usual. Many have applied for these grants in the past and often we've never received any acknowledgement of the paper being received, or the application turned down. This is unlike every other county, state and federal funding grant program.

A BIDoA would eliminate this type of inconsistency and work towards a consistent form of funding available direct to growers as well as institutions using the Western Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (WSARE) model of farmer-rancher grants. In some areas funding through a BIDoA would eliminate the need for some applicants to have a 501c3 as currently required by the R&D department. This would open up funding process to a much wider number of growers and agricultural experts.

A state BIDoA would also enlist the county council and current groups to form area or district advisory councils. It is important that no district on the island be in a position to dictate ag policy or practices in other areas of the island.

The BIDoA would be given the power to order coordination with various university and institutional researchers in order to eliminate duplicate efforts in research as much as to share information on those with like interests. In short, to act as a clearinghouse for all agriculture information on research and funding.

The BIDoA should be given control on all agricultural items imported into the island. Something the state should be doing but has not. The BIDoA should have an active marketing program as well as research and educational programs in conjunction with other institutions.

As suspected, funding for an effective BIDoA would be tricky but I believe doable given those percentages of the budget that already are concerned with agriculture. Some federal assistance and the goodwill of Big Island citizens and growers that this agency be equitable to all regardless of district or political affiliations.

I would like to propose a Big Island Dept. of Agriculture as a ballot issue.
Thank you, Ken Love

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