

Mālama, or Marketing? A Closer Look at Mālama One’s Recycling Plant

By the Sierra Club Hawai‘i Island Group

At first glance, Mālama One’s bottle-to-bottle plastic recycling facility in Hilo seems like a win for Hawai‘i’s sustainability goals. The promise? A closed-loop system that recycles PET plastic bottles shipped from throughout the state on Hawai‘i Island, thereby reducing the amount of plastics being landfilled. But when we look closer, some serious environmental concerns start to emerge, especially around how waste is handled and where it ends up.

According to permit filings and limited public statements, Mālama One intends to transport the facility’s industrial “sludge”—a byproduct of the plastic washing process—to the Pu‘uanahulu landfill. This sludge will include microplastics, residual cleaning chemicals, and other unknown waste materials. While technically legal, hauling industrial waste across the island contributes to fossil fuel emissions and raises concerns about our already limited landfill capacity.

While the public may feel reassured that bottles are being recycled locally, the reality is more complex. We may be managing plastic waste differently—not necessarily better—and that distinction matters. Without a genuine effort to reduce single-use plastics at their source, recycling becomes a temporary solution rather than a lasting one.

The Hawai‘i Island Group (HIG) is concerned about what appears to be a lack of transparency and community involvement. While industrial sludge from plastic recycling can include things like microplastics and residual chemicals, the specific composition of Mālama One’s sludge has not been made publicly clear. Who approved the landfill disposal plan? Have communities been meaningfully informed or invited to give input? Environmental sustainability must include public trust, and that means open, honest conversations before the plant is built and trucks start rolling.

These conversations are important because studies are proving that microplastics have become pervasive in many human organs, including the placenta, and in blood, breast milk, saliva, and even plaques that build up in people’s arteries. The amount of microplastics in the human brain appears to be increasing over time with concentrations rising by roughly 50 percent between 2016 and 2024, with the equivalent amount of plastic in some brains to be that of a plastic spoon.

Despite these shocking findings, the potential health consequences of microplastics remain largely unknown. Some recent research, however, suggests they are likely harmful to the human body. A study published in March 2024, for example, found that patients with higher concentrations of microplastics in their arteries were at a higher risk of heart attacks, stroke and death.

As members of the Sierra Club Hawai‘i Island Group, our *kuleana* (responsibility) is to ask hard questions and advocate for systems that don’t just shift burdens from one place to another.

Should the Mālama One project be approved before there is a detailed project plan available to the state and county regulators and the general public? Is the project a model for future circular

economic development or just green marketing? Should the project be allowed to proceed before regulations for microplastics are developed? Can effective regulations be developed when the health and environmental impacts of microplastics are largely unknown? If these and other important questions are not answered, we risk setting a dangerous precedent for other industrial operations across Hawai'i.

HIG is not opposed to recycling, but we advocate for responsible, regenerative solutions grounded in *mālama 'āina* (care for the land). This means building systems that reduce waste at the source, treat waste responsibly, and involve the community from the outset.

Mālama (to care for) isn't just a name—it's a practice. If we are serious about a truly sustainable, regenerative future for Hawai'i Island, we must hold all initiatives, regardless of their intentions, to the values of transparency, equity, and *aloha 'āina*, a deep love and commitment to all life and the natural resources upon which it depends.