

Article rank | 5 Feb 2012 | Honolulu Star-Advertiser | *By Cecelia B. Smith Cecelia B. Smith, of Honaunau, is president of the Kona Coffee Farmers Association.*

# Marketers misleading public over ‘Kona’ brand

At the request of the Kona Coffee Farmers Association, Hawaii island Sen. Josh Green introduced Senate Bill 2097, which would make mandatory what is now just a voluntary disclosure of the amounts of other coffee in the so-called 10 percent Kona blend now sold throughout Hawaii.

The Star-advertiser published a balanced article on the “Kona” labeling issue (“Coffee Debate Brews,” Jan. 25), followed by a lead editorial supporting the status quo (“Kona coffee doesn’t need label change,” Jan. 28).

Sen. Roslyn Baker, chairwoman of the Commerce and Consumer Protection Committee, to which SB 2097 was referred, almost immediately advised the association’s president that she would not hold a hearing on SB 2097.

The Kona coffee issue of blends versus the pure product is valid. Even in a box of Cheerios, the ingredients must be listed. For example if a product was 10 percent lemonade and 90 percent orange juice, would it be fair to call it a lemonade blend? No, it should be a fruit blend; that is the commonality. A blend of Kona and other Arabica beans should be rightfully called, an Arabica blend. If the name “Kona” appears with a percentage, the origin and percentage of nonKona coffee should be listed on the label as well.

As a kamaaina whose family has been in agriculture for multiple generations, I ask why isn’t our Legislature trying to protect our islands’ agricultural heritage. When we have a pure Hawaii product grown only in the North and South Kona Districts of Hawaii island, should it not have all the protection Hawaii can give it? The 90 percent “other” in a Kona blend is stuff imported from foreign countries, carried across the Pacific Ocean, then mixed with our local Kona coffee, and then allowed to carry the geographical identity of “Kona” in large letters on the front of the bag. Make sense? Not to us Kona Coffee farmers.

Kona is a geographic origin. Only 10 percent in the bag of “Kona blend” is from the origin. Does Sen. Baker not believe in truthful labels?

Hawaii is the only region anywhere in the world that authorizes the use of the name of one of heritage agriculture products with only 10 percent genuine content. Why is that? It’s because it makes money — a lot of money — for the Hawaii Coffee Co., a subsidiary of a subsidiary of a privately owned California conglomerate. Hawaii has been captive to mainland commodity brokers ever since Claus Spreckels tried to corner the market on sugar, but small Hawaii island family farmers like me would like to think that the state would try to give us a level playing field.

In support of its editorial, this paper quoted the head of the Hawaii Coffee Co., who gave the excuse that the other 90 percent of the coffee beans “quickly changes” so it would be hard to change the label and disclose his blend “formula.” What kind of formula quickly changes? The word “Kona” stands for excellence, and sells — which is the real reason the Hawaii Coffee Co. wants to use it. The word “Hawaii” sells vacations. What if vacations were marketed as a 10 percent Hawaiian “blend”: one day in Hawaii, then the other nine days on Wake Island? It just wouldn’t be a Hawaiian vacation, would it?

In this day of computers, a run of accurate labeling for each blended bag would not be significantly difficult to protect our pure Kona product.



Should we allow the mass marketers to rule? Or should the state of Hawaii protect one of its true agricultural jewels?

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