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*Article rank* | *30 Apr 2015* | *Honolulu Star-Advertiser* | *By Krysta Harden*

# Visit to Hawaii showed how USDA is making a difference

As deputy secretary of agriculture, I am lucky to get an in-depth look at agriculture and our nation that few others do.

Earlier this month, that feeling reached a whole new level as I traveled with U.S. Sen. Mazie Hirono and met farmers and growers across the great state of Hawaii.

When most people on the mainland think of Hawaii, the first thing that comes to mind is vacation. While I did have the privilege of seeing a halau in action at the Merrie Monarch Festival and collected many gorgeous lei, the best part of my trip was getting to see the real Hawaii that most people miss if they don't leave the beach.

On Hawaii island, I sat down with Eric and Jon Tanouye, the father and son team behind Green Point Nurseries, who taught me about orchid and anthurium production and the challenges that invasive pests present to their livelihood. At every stop on my visit — from the nursery, to the Kona Coffee Living History Farm, to farmers and ranchers I met in Waimea — we spent a lot of time talking about invasive species and their impact on Hawaii's ability to export not only to other countries, but to the mainland as well.

I was happy to learn about how U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) research conducted at the Daniel K. Inouye Pacific Basin Agricultural Research Center (PBARC) is helping to combat invasive pests like the coffee berry borer, and is helping growers in other ways, like improving the quality and profitability of tropical fruits destined for exports.

During my meetings with farmers, growers and PBARC staff, we discussed ways to build on these efforts to better serve producers and meet the unique needs of those living in Hawaii.

We visited a USDA project that helped the Hawaiian Shores Community Association in Pahoia upgrade its water system and ensure clean, available drinking water to the community.

I talked with community leaders there about how USDA can help residents develop strategies to address the invasive albizia trees, reduce energy costs and improve recovery efforts in the wake of storms like Hurricane Iselle and the lava flow in Pahoia.

As deputy, I've made it a priority to ensure that USDA reaches those just starting out in farming and ranching.

One of my favorite parts of the trip was meeting with Thai immigrant farmers at the Kunia Research Station and beginning farmers participating in the GoFarm Hawaii program at Leeward Community College. Each farmer that I met at these two stops was making his or her own way in the agricultural field and helping to strengthen Hawaii agriculture as a whole.

At Liholiho Elementary School in Honolulu, we talked with fifth-graders and administrators. The students were supportive of the healthier school meals. They talked about how they now eat fast food less and have learned how to make things like kale shakes that they then ask their families to prepare at home.

I was pleasantly surprised to hear most of the students say that broccoli was their favorite vegetable — I know that my habits were not nearly as healthy at that age.

I went to Hawaii with the goal of listening, learning and carrying my experiences back with me to Washington, D.C. It was great to see USDA programs in action and to get feedback on ways that USDA can better serve the unique needs of Hawaii.



To the farmers, ranchers, growers and all the people of Hawaii, thank you for an educational and enlightening trip.

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