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HB 2739
RELATING TO PLANT QUARANTINE

House Committees on
Agriculture
Energy and Environmental Protection

Public Hearing - February 19, 1992
8:30 AM, Rm 1206 SOT

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HB 2739 would amend Chapter 150A, HRS, by adding a new section which provides for regulation of the importation of foreign species of plants into the state.

Our statement on this bill does not represent an institutional position of the University of Hawaii.

The threat posed to Hawaiian endemic species and habitats by exotic plant species cannot be stated strongly enough. Explosive infestations of banana poka, Coster's curse, and Clidemia continue to place heavy drains on management personnel and resources. African fountain grass is rampant on the Big Island, leading to the threat of wildfires that may consume other endangered plants. Presently limited stands of Miconia seem harmless, yet a similar infestation in Tahiti has overtaken much of that island's natural habitat. Almost all of these plants were imported for "constructive" purposes, but only now are we becoming aware of the long term consequences of their introduction. At best, these occurrences have been tragic mistakes; at worst, in view of the known fragility of endemic natural habitat and the disproportionate preponderance of endangered species relative to Hawaii's meager land area, irresponsible introductions constitute a violation of the spirit, if not the letter of the federal Endangered Species Act.

In view of the millions of dollars required to eliminate established populations of invading exotics such as those noted above, economically-based arguments against the sensible management proposals which this measure would implement seem misplaced. However, the determination of

a plant's classification is delegated to the Department of Agriculture; the plant and animal advisory committee is composed of a majority appointed by the chairman of the Board of Agriculture; and the Board itself, as established in Section 26-16(a), is comprised of a majority "from the agricultural community or the agricultural support sector", and is mandated by Section 26-16(c) to promote agricultural interests. Vesting both regulatory and promotional functions within the same government agency constitutes bad public policy, and we suggest that an alternative regulatory responsibility be designated for determination of import classifications of all species, plant, animal, and microorganism alike. These decisions should be made by an independent commission comprised of a balanced representation from industry, conservationists, and credentialed professionals, all appointed by the Governor. In addition, the Commission should report to both the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Land and Natural Resources.

Given the costs, both monetary and in terms of lost natural habitat, of an injudicious decision concerning an imported species, the utmost in objectivity and rational conservatism is warranted. These decisions are too important to be clouded by political agendas.