

Hawaii is ground zero for GMO debate: Earth Island Journal weighs in

The recent controversy over GMOs in Hawaii seem to exemplify the concerns heard in the larger agricultural biotech debate. Arguments over pesticides, big-ag vs little farms, and the legitimacy of the “feed the world rhetoric” override conversation. Suddenly sides are chosen and communication becomes a thing of the past.

Maureen Nandini Mitra takes a step back to understand the particular place Hawaiians are coming from in the GM debate in her new piece in *Earth Island Journal* titled Trouble in Paradise. The debate has had two major milestones as of late: the passage of Bill 2491, a law requiring pesticide and genetically altered crops disclosure in Kauai County; and Bill 113, a bill restricting growing new GM crops.

Health concerns plague Hawaiian agriculture workers to such a degree that GMOs and pesticide have become permanently intertwined.

“The thing with the Kauai bill is that it exposes the link between GMOs and pesticides,” says Bill Freese of the Center for Food Safety. The Kauai measure is important, Freese says, because it skips the question of whether GMOs are safe for human consumption and instead focuses on the issue of public health in farming communities. “It’s indisputable that the GMOs that are being grown commercially have sharply increased pesticide use, despite industry claims.”

Food security has also found it’s way into the debate. Biotech companies manage about 15,000 acres of land, but much of that land is used for research and to grow seeds shipped to the mainland. The state imports about 90% of it’s food.

Although big agriculture has seen it’s fair share of antagonism worldwide, it might be having a harder time finding welcome in Hawaii, writes Mitra, thanks to the state’s colonialist past.

For many Hawaiians, the GM seed industry’s growing presence and political clout represent the beginnings of a new form of colonialism – one where corporations have replaced the sugar barons who ran the state for more than a century. For them, the fight against GMOs isn’t just about agricultural practices and what kind of food we put on the table, it’s also part of a larger struggle to reclaim the islands’ political sovereignty. “To me the real underlying story in all of this is Hawaii is a occupied nation and it’s been used as an experimental station all along,” says co-founder of ‘Ohana O Kaua’i, a local environmental and community rights group.. “They test sonar, they test missiles, they sprayed Agent Orange here before using it in Vietnam, and now they are growing seeds for the largest human experiment ever.”

Finally land ownership is “another vexed issue,” writes Mitra, also tied up in a long complicated history.

Hawaii is among the few US states that have more rented or leased farmland than farmer-owned properties (Illinois and Iowa are two other examples). Much of the state's 280,000 acres of arable agricultural land belongs to trusts set up by erstwhile plantation barons and an educational trust called Kamehameha Schools, which was established by the last direct descendant of Hawaii's last king, Kamehameha I. The trust owns about 365,000 acres across Hawaii.

These landowners prefer to strike deals with Big Ag outfits that can rent or buy huge land parcels in one go. Monsanto, for instance, bought 2,300 acres of prime agricultural land in Oahu from the James Campbell Estate in 2007 and has leased another 1,033 acres from Kamehameha Schools. In Kauai, Dow has a 50-year lease of 3,400 acres belonging to the Robinson family, one of the islands' biggest landowners.

This makes it harder for small farmers, those that would be helping to feed the state, by giving them limited land options.

But Mitra ends her piece on an high note, "a sense of optimism that a new, sustainable way of life is within reach." But it's not clear if that sustainable life could include GMOs.

Read the full original article: [Trouble in Paradise](#)

Additional Resources:

- [Liberals v. Science: As Hawaiians debate GMOs, local legislator committed to science is ostracized](#), New York Times
- [Plant scientist analyzes Hawaii County's anti-GMO Bill 113](#), Biofortified
- [Agricultural scientist Steve Savage reflects on the anti-GMO bill in Hawaii](#), Applied Mythology