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Column: Water bill would enable smoother ag transition, such as on old A&B lands

By Maria N. Isotov • April 21, 2019

As a former public water and land planner, I've been following this House Bill 1326 water issue with great interest — and I am deeply concerned that the failure of this bill at the Legislature will result in long-term and irreparable consequences for Maui's water supply. I support HB 1326, the governor's strong leadership on this issue, the Legislature's support of the bill and for the Legislature to allow the state Department of Land and Natural Resources to do its job.

I've devoted many years to working on water and land use matters for the benefit of Maui and its residents, previously serving as a planner with the Maui County Water Department and the Planning Department, and as a member of the Upcountry Water Use and Development Plan Working Group. I've been involved in land-use planning on Maui as a private consultant for more than 15 years and am a licensed real estate broker. In fact, I was instrumental in the creation of the Farm Plan requirement on Maui ag lands, in which 51% of an agricultural parcel on which a farm dwelling sits must be used for agriculture.

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I consider myself an environmentalist, but have been greatly disappointed by environmental groups like Maui Tomorrow that are misusing their clout to promote a narrow and potentially detrimental viewpoint on this issue.

The East Maui Irrigation (EMI) system is an expensive and functional system that delivers both potable and agricultural water to its end users. We the public are able to receive that water because EMI's owner, Alexander & Baldwin, cooperates with Maui's Department of Water Supply to deliver that water for domestic, commercial and agricultural uses. This is not a new relationship, nor is it about evil corporate control of water. It's a long-standing partnership between the public and private sectors that mutually supports the health, safety and public good of our island community.

With the end of 100-plus years of Maui's sugar industry, and a changing of the guard in ownership of Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar's (HC&S) former acreage, we are undergoing a significant and potentially exciting transition on Maui. Ensuring that transition occurs peacefully and efficiently should be a high priority for our island. That includes ensuring EMI's water system is not disrupted, resulting in disrepair, but can continue to operate over the next few years while this transition moves along. Some 40,000 acres is not easy to bring online in new forms of ag.

As the new owner of HC&S lands in Central Maui, Mahi Pono has announced its vision for sustainable agriculture practices and thriving local ag production. Rather than putting up false arguments and dividing our island, we should be coming together to celebrate that vision and seek ways to make that promising future a reality.

Yes, it's quite possible that entities such as Maui Tomorrow and the Sierra Club of Hawaii could wage a costly and drawn-out legal battle — but where is the long-term vision in that? For the greater good of our island community, please support HB 1326, to allow longer-term revocable water use permits. Revocable, after all, means it can be stopped.

When we pause and reflect upon the long-term needs of our community, it's apparent that HB 1326's efforts to extend EMI's water permit by a few years is only a temporary measure that will help support a smoother and less disruptive transition from sugar to diversified local agriculture in Maui's Central Valley, without jeopardizing the daily delivery of water to our island's farmers and residents. Yes, residents via their home taps currently benefit from the EMI system.

So what if this temporary extension requires passage of a bill or a special dispensation or variance? Don't we the public have a legitimate right to take a long-term perspective on water planning and do what is necessary to ensure this transition proceeds successfully?

Rather than being hell-bent on "taking down" A&B or other entities, our community would be better served if opponents of HB 1326 stopped complaining and filing lawsuits, and focused instead on substantive solutions that would enable viable ag production.

Maria N. Isotov, a long-time Maui resident and former Maui County water planner, owns a land-planning company and is a real estate broker.
