

Council Chair
Alice L. Lee

Vice-Chair
Yuki Lei K. Sugimura

Presiding Officer Pro Tempore
Tasha Kama

Councilmembers
Tom Cook
Gabe Johnson
Tamara Paltin
Keani N.W. Rawlins-Fernandez
Shane M. Sinenci
Nohelani U'u-Hodgins



Director of Council Services
David M. Raatz, Jr., Esq.

Deputy Director of Council Services
Richelle K. Kawasaki, Esq.

COUNTY COUNCIL
COUNTY OF MAUI
200 S. HIGH STREET
WAILUKU, MAUI, HAWAII 96793
www.MauiCounty.us

September 5, 2024

The Honorable Josh Green, M.D., Governor
State of Hawaii
State Capitol
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

Via email: transmit.docs@hawaii.gov

Dear Governor Green:

**SUBJECT: FIRE PROTECTION, MANAGEMENT, AND
AGRICULTURAL LEASING OF STATE LANDS AT
KAMEHAMENUI, MAUI (PAF 24-218)**

Since the devastating wildfires in Lahaina and Upcountry Maui in August 2023, we share a heightened awareness of the need for responsible land management. We also share long-standing concerns over the decline of active agricultural lands and local food production.

The State of Hawaii is to be commended for its continued acquisition of important lands to restore native plant and animal habitats for recreation, preservation of open space, and other notable public purposes. However, there is one example where recently acquired State land should be allowed to continue to be ranched for agricultural purposes, as this would be the most immediate and effective fire prevention and land management option at no cost to the State.

In 2020, the State acquired 3,400 acres of the former Erehwon Ranch (von Tempsky) from a private family trust. The land has been ranched for decades. Notably, the ranch has been supervised by well-known Upcountry rancher Brendan Balthazar for the last 18 years. The Department of Land and Natural Resources has a laudable long-term plan to plant trees, provide habitat for endangered wildlife, and implement other conservation measures, including the development of recreational resources. Mr. Balthazar has been given notice to vacate these lands, of which he ranches close to half of the 7,500 acres. *Honolulu*

The Honorable Josh Green, M.D.
Governor, State of Hawaii
September 5, 2024
Page 2

Civil Beat published an article about Mr. Balthazar and the conversion of land from ranch to conservation uses on July 16, 2023: <https://www.civilbeat.org/2023/07/a-maui-rancher-prepares-to-lose-3400-acres-to-conservation/>.

Accordingly, I encourage you to permit Mr. Balthazar to maintain the leasing of the 3,400 acres of Kamehamenui lands that he has been successfully ranching for nearly two decades.

As you may have already viewed the photos of the July 2024 wildfire on Crater Road in Kula, you may have noticed the areas that were burned were not well managed, with overgrown vegetation allowing the fire to spread rapidly. The land adjacent to the burn area had been recently grazed, which helped to prevent the fire from extending into those pastures.

As the State has active jurisdiction over thousands of acres in Upcountry Maui, I recognize that immediate management for fire prevention may be infeasible through new methods. Granting continued ranching activities that are being practiced in Kamehamenui would provide an ongoing and effective solution that would not require costly alternatives. Proactive management of State lands—considering the need for fire protection and prevention throughout Maui County and the State—is critical.

Continuing ranching at Kamehamenui includes the benefit of preserving active agricultural uses when we are experiencing a decrease of both small and large farms. We are aware of the statistic that demonstrates our high food insecurity, as more than 90 percent of our food is imported into the State. We must prioritize existing farm and ranch operations that provide a dual benefit for proactive land management.

Maui's agricultural and Upcountry communities have expressed their support for Kamehamenui to remain in active agricultural use, preserving agricultural lands, the paniolo lifestyle, and the open spaces and pastures and to best manage these lands for fire protection and prevention. I respectfully ask for your support in this matter.

The Honorable Josh Green, M.D.
Governor, State of Hawaii
September 5, 2024
Page 3

Should you have any questions, please contact me or Legislative Analyst Eric Arquero at (808) 270-7653. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Alice L. Lee".

ALICE L. LEE, Chair
Maui County Council

paf:epa:24-218a

cc: Dawn Chang, Chairperson, Board of Land and Natural Resources, State of Hawaii
Sharon Hurd, Chairperson, Board of Agriculture, State of Hawaii
Brendan Balthazar
Bobbie Patnode