



WARD RESEARCH

**FOCUS GROUPS AMONG OAHU AND
NEIGHBOR ISLAND HOMEOWNERS
SUMMARY OF FOCUS GROUP
FINDINGS**

Prepared for:

COORDINATING GROUP ON ALIEN PEST SPECIES

November 2003

This summary presents highlights from three (3) focus groups conducted October 28 and 30, and November 1, 2003, as follows:

- One group of Oahu single family homeowners;
- One group of both Oahu and Neighbor Island single family homeowners; and
- One group of renters or multi-family homeowners.

The objective was to explore homeowners' and renters' attitudes toward alien pests and assist the Coordinating Group on Alien Pest Species (CGAPS) in finetuning possible messages for an upcoming consumer media campaign. The key findings follow:

Alien Pest Issues Important but Not Urgent to Residents

- Focus groups suggest that a broad and sustained public education campaign will be needed to raise awareness of and support for combating invasive pests in Hawaii. Based on the feedback, invasive species are not top-of-mind concerns of residents, taking a back seat to development and recycling among environmental issues.
- The key role of the media in creating awareness makes the CGAPS media campaign critical to building public support for measures against invasive species. Group participants were aware mainly of those pests covered recently by the media, like the coqui frog, the brown tree snake, miconia, and *salvinia molesta* algae in Lake Wilson. They displayed little knowledge about how invasive species affect the natural environment and the health of the human population. Unless residents read or hear about invasive species in the media, they assume them not to be a problem.

“If we don’t have any brown tree snakes here, then we must be doing a good job to keep them out.” (Oahu homeowner)

“If I don’t read it in the paper, it doesn’t bother me. Someone must be doing their job.” (Oahu homeowner)

- An ‘out-of-sight, out-of-mind,’ attitude, then, seems to prevail with respect to invasive species. One resident, asked what his threshold level of concern would be, responded honestly that it “depends on how close you are to the problem.”

“Until it’s in your back yard, you don’t care. If it’s happening somewhere else, you don’t care.” (Oahu renter)

“It becomes serious only when it affects us directly. Otherwise, we’re too busy trying to take care of ourselves.” (Neighbor Island homeowner)

- Moreover, there is a widespread assumption that *someone else* --- e.g., the state, the Department of Agriculture, the private environmental groups – is addressing the problem. Asked “what steps can individuals take?” not many volunteered to change their own behavior or felt their own actions to be critical to prevention.

“The fault lies with the government. They don’t enforce the penalties [against importing alien species], and the penalties are not severe enough to be a deterrent. If you get caught, you pay a \$25 fine, or you throw it into the amnesty bin. Where’s the deterrent?” (Neighbor Island homeowner)

- Few admitted bringing in alien species, but some acknowledged knowing about – and not reporting -- people who had smuggled alien animals into the state. Others felt that if they declared fruits brought from the mainland, these would be taken away by inspectors (one woman complained of inspectors confiscating her crate of oranges from Florida). With respect to alien plants, there is very little concern; one resident even remarked that he brought in pine tree saplings undeclared with the intention of planting them in a local forest.

“I brought in two small pine trees from the mainland and I didn’t declare them. Once they grow big enough, I’m going to plant them in the forests near Volcano.” (Oahu homeowner)

“I sat next to someone on the airplane who brought a small green snake from California to Hawaii in his pocket.” (Neighbor Island homeowner)

“I have a calabash cousin who brought in two python snakes as a wedding thank you gift.” (Oahu homeowner)

Attitudes toward Invasive Plants:

The “Safe for Hawaii” Concept and the Weed Risk Assessment (WRA) system

- A key finding: residents have no clue that many plant products imported into and sold in Hawaii may be harmful to the environment. In response to a question about choosing plants marked “safe for Hawaii,”¹ participants expressed disbelief that such a label would be needed, the assumption being that retail plants were already screened as “safe.” “*Otherwise, why would they be sold if they’re not safe?*” many wondered.

¹ The moderator asked ‘If you were buying a plant and had a choice between two similar plants, but one was marked “safe for Hawaii,” would this influence your choice of plants?’

“Aren’t all the plants safe? Would the stores sell a product that’s not safe for Hawaii? I’m assuming that Walmart has professional buyers buying plants that are safe for Hawaii’s environment.” (Oahu homeowner)

“Aren’t all plants coming into Hawaii inspected by the Agriculture Department? Don’t they have to pass some kind of test?” (Neighbor Island homeowner)

“I would ask how they determined that it is ‘safe for Hawaii’?” (Oahu homeowner)

- The moderator’s explanation of the Weed Risk Assessment (WRA) System seemed to satisfy those questioning the “Safe for Hawaii” label. However, it is clear that point-of-purchase labels and signs explaining the WRA may not be enough to induce buyers to purchase “safe” plants. The campaign may need to discuss invasive plants at length, including their potential impact on native forests and the need to screen even species commonly sold to consumers. On a positive note, participants for the most part agreed that the state *should* require only WRA-certified plants be used in public construction projects.

“If I saw that sign [‘Safe for Hawaii’], I would assume that it’s some kind of indigenous plant, like Koa or Kamani.” (Neighbor Island homeowner)

“They would need to familiarize the public with this (WRA) via the media in order to educate us.” (Oahu homeowner)

“They should require it (“safe for Hawaii”) not only in landscaping but in the sales by garden shops as well.” (Oahu homeowner)

Supporting Inspections of Parcels and Produce

- Building support for inspections of mail parcels may be another challenge, the research suggests. Pest-related inspections are not seen as high priorities by residents, particularly if they require additional public funds. Many endorsed them only on condition that they are conducted cost-effectively and non-invasively. Others suggested that pest-related inspections be folded into the drug- or weapons-related screening of mail parcels, based on their assumption that smuggled animals could be spotted easily by mail inspectors since parcels containing such animals “would be moving.” *“Since they are already doing it, it wouldn’t be a problem to look for snakes, too,”* said one resident.

Inspections of Parcels and Produce (continued)

“Is there a proven need for these inspections? I haven’t seen any evidence that we have snakes or iguanas running around.” (Oahu homeowner)

“It’s a very low priority compared to other things. Unless the technology is available to do it cheaply, I don’t see it as necessary.” (Oahu renter)

- There is also reluctance to back inspections of fruits and produce at added cost. Asked “Would you be willing to pay 3 cents more per pound for a more thorough inspection of produce?” some were skeptical of the need for this, saying they had seen no indications of a problem in the media. *“I wouldn’t pay more to inspect it for bugs because I don’t think it’s a problem,”* said one resident. Others, interestingly, were more concerned with pesticide residue on produce than with invasive species.

“I’d be more concerned with what I am eating than what bugs are coming along with the produce.” (Oahu homeowner)

“If the inspection involves treating the produce to sterilize or kill any pests, then paying more may be worth it. But if it’s only a visual inspection, what is the use of that?” (Oahu homeowner)

Reactions to the “Don’t Pack a Pest”

- The “Don’t Pack a Pest” concept was well-understood and well-received in the groups, but some felt this message applied more to visitors than to residents. Visitors and the commercial cargo services, they said, are more likely sources of invasive pests than are local residents, with the exception of residents who travel outside the state. To reach these travelers, one participant suggested showing a video or distributing a brief ‘fact sheet’ to residents at the airport or in the terminals.

“Putting out this message here is a waste. It should be put out prior to arriving here, maybe at the mainland terminals for visitors bound for Hawaii, maybe by the airlines.” (Neighbor Island homeowner)

“Locals who are going to foreign countries could use an education, maybe in the form of a single, easy-to-read sheet that talks about not only your shoes, but also what you can and shouldn’t bring back, signs of illness. Make it comprehensive.” (Oahu homeowner)

- The “Don’t Pack a Pest” theme, then, is appropriate for the local market given the apparent ‘disconnect’ among some residents who believe that the “Don’t Pack a Pest” theme does not apply to them primarily, yet feel no responsibility to report either their own imported species or those observed on others (see Page 3 discussion).

Reactions to the “Don’t Plant a Pest” Concept

- Reactions to the “Don’t Plant a Pest” message were similar to reactions to the “Safe for Hawaii” concept -- many participants wondered why invasive plant species are being sold to consumers. CGAPS may consider first establishing the premise that potentially harmful plant species are routinely imported by retailers – hence, the need for a screening system to protect the environment.

Use of Invasive Pest Hotline

- Focus group responses suggest that there is little awareness of the Pest Hotline. Asked “*who would you call if you saw unknown insects, animals or plants?*” no one in the groups mentioned this hotline, but some said they would call the state Department of Agriculture or the University of Hawaii to report an unknown pest.
- Any hotline advertised for pest reporting should be caller-friendly and responsive (i.e., not a voicemail system), feedback indicated. Residents have little patience with leaving messages or dialing through a phone chain. Unless they can speak to someone instantly, they are not likely to persist in reaching authorities. Neighbor Islanders said they do not want to pay toll charges to report a pest, and, moreover, they preferred to call someone local before dialing a toll-free off-island number.



There is a considerable knowledge gap among residents with respect to invasive pest issues, based on this research. While certain pests are well-known (owing to media attention), the public in general feels no urgency about the problem and presumes that invasive pests are under control. Findings clearly support the need for sustained public education focusing on (a) the long-term impact of invasive pests on the natural environment and the human population; as well as (b) the need for individual residents to take responsibility for prevention.



The “Don’t Plant a Pest” campaign may be especially critical given the lack of public concern over invasive plant species. At present, residents appear to have no inkling that some plants sold at retail may be invasive, the assumption being that these products have already been screened to be environmentally safe.

Readers should keep in mind that focus groups are qualitative-based research and findings cannot be projected to the population of homeowners and renters. However, findings described in this summary are directional and can be used by CGAPS in the development of communications.

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