

ASAP quick to inspect air cargo for stow-aways

Kia'i Moku

By Lissa Fox



Have you ever wondered if anyone actually reads those agricultural forms each

airline passenger fills out when flying in to Hawaii? Before landing, flight attendants on every mainland flight hand out forms asking if passengers are carrying fruit, vegetables, pets, soil, or fungus. As time-consuming as the form appears, it is a necessary tool in the fight against invasive species, and is only one part of a system to stop invasive species from becoming established on Maui. Those forms are carefully reviewed by agricultural inspectors at the Kahului airport, helping to prevent passengers from unwittingly bringing invasive species into the state. Elsewhere at the airport, not visible to passengers or local residents, another type of inspection is taking place every single day.

At the Alien Species Action Plan (ASAP) inspection facility, tucked away at the end of the runway, inspectors are poring over containers of produce, plants, and cut flowers. Any plant material coming through the airport, whether destined for a garden, dinner table, or floral arrangement, is carefully screened for plant diseases or hitchhiking bugs that threaten Hawaii's agriculture or environment.

The Hawaii Department of Agriculture has a staff of thirteen inspectors on Maui. These pest sleuths are tasked with inspecting air freight from early in the morning until the last flight of the day, while also covering maritime shipments and conducting inspections at local businesses. The highly trained inspectors are able to identify a wide range of insects and spiders as well as fungi, bacteria, and viruses. If inspectors find an obviously infested shipment or an insect or disease that is new to Hawaii, they have the authority to reject or destroy the infested plant material. Infested cargo may be frozen until the hitchhikers are dead. If the cargo is infected with a disease, the material is placed in an autoclave, which uses pressurized



Through quarterly "blitz" assessments, inspectors know that Mexican avocados can harbor an insect not found in Hawaii. In this picture, Wayne Uradoma is inspecting an incoming avocado.

steam and super-hot water (248° F) to kill any microorganisms before the cargo is thrown away.

The Maui ASAP inspection facility is a model for invasive species prevention for the entire state. Built in response to concerns about invasive species following the proposed expansion of the Kahului airport, it was completed in December of 2007. To prevent winged stow-aways from leaving the facility, inspection bays at the ASAP facility are screened and equipped with bug zappers. The bay where high-risk material is inspected is completely isolated from the outside. High efficiency particulate air filters on the ventilation system help prevent the escape of harmful organisms. Prior to completion of the building, inspections had to be done on the open tarmac, with no ability to contain whatever lurked inside the cargo. HDOA hopes to build similar facilities throughout the state.

Inspectors base their decisions about what to inspect on risk assessments, which are conducted throughout the year. Every quarter, they spend two weeks examining 100% of the material coming through the facility. They record everything they find as well as where it was grown. This is no small task considering that over 95% of Hawaii's produce is imported.

In one particularly infested shipment, a single head of lettuce was discovered to harbor 26 different species of insects, with 19 of those species not known to occur in Hawaii. This is not a job for amateurs.

These quarterly "blitz" assessments help inspectors prioritize their work during the rest of the year. For example, inspectors know that avocados from Mexico tend to harbor an insect not found in Hawaii, so when Mexican avocados are on the cargo manifest, they inspect the avocados thoroughly, whereas apples from the northwest United States rarely carry insects of concern and don't need the same level of scrutiny. Inspectors work with importers, letting them know what is being destroyed and why. Importers respond by making sure material is clean before being shipped; it's in their financial interest to avoid having their shipments rejected or destroyed.

It turns out that the new inspection building is a far more cosmopolitan place than its low-profile location on the tarmac might suggest. There are visitors coming from many distant locations, but they are stowed away in plant material, not eagerly looking for a lei greeting at the baggage area. Thanks in no small part to the work of the inspectors with the Hawaii De-

partment of Agriculture, most of the unruly invasive species amongst the crowd only make it as far as the ASAP inspection facility. To help keep it that way, the next time you return from the mainland or a foreign country, be sure you're not bringing in plants or animals that could harm our agricultural industry or environment. And take the time to fill out the agricultural form. Honestly. And completely. Early detection of invasive species is critical. Maybe that's why the HDOA facility is called ASAP.

• Lissa Fox is the public relations and education specialist representing the Maui Invasive Species Committee, or MISC. "Kia'i Moku," (Guarding the Island) is prepared by the Maui Invasive Species Committee to provide information on protecting the island from invasive plants and animals that can threaten the island's environment, economy and quality of life.