



# Kamehameha Schools®

## Testimony of Kā'eo Duarte Vice President of Community and 'Āina Resiliency

February 18, 2022

### RE: U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Rules and Committee on Natural Resources - Joint Roundtable Discussion Examining Indigenous Nutrition and Food Systems

Aloha e Chair McGovern, Chair Grijalva, and honorable members of the Rules and Natural Resources Committees.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide input on Indigenous nutrition and food systems. Kamehameha Schools is a private trust established by Ke Ali'i Bernice Pauahi Bishop, the great granddaughter and last royal descendent of Kamehameha I. Our mission is to create educational opportunities in perpetuity to improve the capability and well-being of people of Hawaiian ancestry.

As a Native Hawaiian educational organization and landowner, we recognize our deep kinship to 'āina (*land, that which feeds*), its native ecosystems, cultural resources, and water resources that continue to shape Native Hawaiian identity. We believe as an Indigenous people, we have inherited the responsibility, through our genealogical connections, to ensure the health and vitality of our lands in perpetuity. We believe that the health and vitality of the 'āina, including the state of our Indigenous food systems, have a direct impact on the educational outcomes of our learners and the health and well-being of all people in Hawai'i.

### Summary of Recommendations

For the reasons discussed in more detail below, Kamehameha Schools supports the preservation, expansion, and improvement of Indigenous food systems on our lands and beyond. By supporting Indigenous food systems, we better serve the nutritional needs of Indigenous peoples, resulting in better educational and life outcomes. To actualize the full benefits of thriving Indigenous food systems, we encourage Congress to further explore ways the federal government can assist in the following efforts:

- Reconnecting Indigenous people to their traditional foods and the systems that produce them by:
  - Supporting and expanding farm-to-school programs in Indigenous communities
  - Re-integrating Indigenous crops within the medicinal landscape to address health and wellness within our Indigenous communities
  - Supporting career pathway development within Indigenous food systems
- Increasing access to Indigenous foods within our communities by:

- Improving the availability and affordability of Indigenous foods, particularly for low-income Native families, including through programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
- Supporting solutions such as food hubs, which can assist farmers growing Indigenous crops to make their produce accessible to Native consumers.
- Improve production of Indigenous crops by:
  - Improving access to capital for mitigation efforts to protect Indigenous crops from biological threats such as diseases, pests, and invasive species
  - Expanding support to food hubs that are the backbone of small farmers - including Indigenous and minority farmers
  - Incentivizing farmers to grow Native crops including kalo (taro), 'ulu (breadfruit), mai'a (native banana), and other Native Hawaiian staples
- Improving the resiliency of Native communities' food systems by:
  - Supporting policy to celebrate and grow each state's unique locally grown crops
  - Supporting policy that protects the authenticity of Hawai'i made products

The following sections describe in more detail these needs and opportunities to improve Indigenous food systems as observed through the work of our organization serving Native Hawaiian communities.

### **Federal Trust Responsibility to Native Hawaiians**

In considering the federal government's role in supporting the nutritional needs and food systems that serve Native Hawaiians, it is important to first recognize that Congress has consistently and expressly acknowledged a special political and trust relationship with Native Hawaiians based on our status as the Indigenous, once-sovereign people of Hawai'i in the enactment of more than 150 legislative measures. This is the same trust responsibility that Congress has recognized is owed to all Native peoples of the United States. Accordingly, Congress has enacted programs and policies to promote education, healthcare, housing, and a variety of other Native Hawaiian community needs. These programs are administered by the Executive Branch, often through Native Hawaiian organizations.

### **Overview of Indigenous Food Systems**

Indigenous food systems are methods of cultivating local ingredients based on Native-born knowledge and innovation developed over many generations. These systems exist as a testament to the endurance of Indigenous peoples throughout the centuries, and some experts argue they are now more important than ever. Not only do Indigenous food systems provide much-needed nutrients and diet diversity to their local population, but they also demonstrate innovation, adaptability, and biodiversity in the face of major challenges, such as climate change. Indigenous food systems are aligned to Native cultural identity and values toward land and perpetuate sustainable practices capable of serving many generations going forward, which is especially important for Native Hawaiians living on an island with limited resources.

Indigenous food systems are also critical to the health and well-being of all Indigenous people, contributing to food security and the eradication of hunger and poverty. These contributions promote better health outcomes, which are critical for Native Hawaiians and other Indigenous peoples who are disproportionately affected by chronic conditions compared with other racial/ethnic groups. These diet-related issues are often connected to a reliance on outside food sources that put the health of Indigenous people at risk.

## **Reconnecting Indigenous People to Our Foods**

Historical injustices and modern society have in many ways forced Native people away from their ancestral lands and, in the process, disconnected us from the Indigenous food systems that have provided physical and social sustenance to our people for generations. In Hawai'i, many do not see farming or other food production as a financially viable career path. Native students, driven by the need to earn degrees or other credentials to find gainful employment, are often restricted to classrooms or digital settings. Most never get the opportunity to experience growing their food, harvesting, and preparing their own meals. As a result, our current educational and societal system has fostered generations of people disconnected from our food and the systems that provide it.

As an educational institution, we are expanding curriculum to reconnect our students to the process of growing and preparing food. Programs like Farm-to-School support curriculum that teaches our children about our Indigenous crops, reconnecting them to their culture and improving their food security. School gardens give students the opportunity to experience growing food, helping them understand the work that goes into the food they consume. Procurement of locally grown and indigenous foods for school meals fosters additional educational opportunities and provides the nutrition students need to pursue academic success. The opportunity to eat locally grown and Indigenous foods at school encourages students and their families to change their eating habits at home and reconnects them to the foods of their ancestors.

For these reasons, we encourage Congress to further support Farm-to-School programs, emphasizing programs in Indigenous communities, including by:

- Incentivizing or providing additional resources for schools to purchase Indigenous foods and diversify menu offerings in school lunches; and
- Supporting school garden programs to refamiliarize our students and families to our indigenous crops.

We also believe that re-integrating Indigenous crops within the medicinal landscape to address health and wellness within Indigenous communities and supporting career pathway development within Indigenous food systems are other key strategies to reconnect Indigenous peoples with our traditional foods.

## **Increasing Access to Indigenous Foods**

Food sovereignty empowers Native households and communities to address issues of hunger and health by cultivating their own healthy, fresh foods. Unfortunately, barriers to accessing healthy and nutritious foods, including Indigenous foods, for our Indigenous people exist. While many of Hawai'i's rural areas have farms, the community often lacks access to the food produced on these farms. Many farms do not have the capability to sell directly to customers and face challenges when selling via a farmer's market or through other forms of retail. It's also difficult for farmers to compete financially with imported foods, resulting in locally produced foods being more expensive.

These challenges make it difficult for Native households and communities to have access to healthy and nutritious foods, leading to a greater dependency on processed and imported foods, resulting in the importation of 85% of the food consumed in Hawai'i.

Native Hawaiians are a large percentage of the workforce that do not make a living wage, and are thus forced to purchase cheaper, and often processed, less healthy foods. Healthy food incentive programs have increased the purchasing power of low-income families to buy fruits and vegetables at grocery stores and farmers' markets, thereby helping reduce hunger, improve nutrition, and support U.S. agriculture and retail.

One example is Hawai'i's DA BUX Double Up Food Bucks program, which increases the purchasing power of SNAP recipients toward locally grown fruits and vegetables. Colorado State University found that each DA BUX incentive dollar matched on a SNAP dollar to purchase local produce has an economic multiplier of 2.3, which means each incentive dollar used by a SNAP recipient to purchase local produce contributes \$2.3 dollars to Hawai'i's economy. If the DA BUX program was further scaled to food retail locations statewide, the potential economic contribution would be \$14M-\$22M in one year. This would help families, ensure that small businesses and local farmers thrive, and provide for a more sustainable local economy in Hawai'i. As of May 2021, 203,885 Hawai'i residents were receiving SNAP benefits in Hawai'i, a 15% increase from the previous year.

For these reasons, we encourage Congress to help improve food access for Indigenous communities by:

- Continuing to support programs like SNAP and DA BUX, which have assisted Native Hawaiians in purchasing of Indigenous healthy food options.
- Supporting food hubs, which can assist farmers growing Indigenous crops to make their produce accessible to Native consumers.

## **Production of Indigenous Foods**

Indigenous crops and the traditional agroecosystems they were grown in, were developed over many generations and work in harmony with the environment, improving and protecting the biodiversity of the land and the well-being of our people. Indigenous food systems often play a wider role in environmental conservation and can also help address climate change. For example, the Cherangani people in Kenya have returned to traditional agroforestry methods,

such as intercropping avocado, bean and coffee crops, to help cut down on soil erosion and reduce water loss.

“Indigenous peoples more than any other peoples in the world are deeply connected with nature and with natural resources, so whatever they do is in relation to the concept of sustainability, of protection and conservations of natural resources,” says Mattia Prayer Galletti, lead technical specialist focusing on Indigenous peoples and tribal issues at International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

Recently, researchers from the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa published a study highlighting the role Indigenous agriculture could play in producing food while supporting biodiversity and Indigenous well-being in Hawai‘i. The report’s authors found that in one experimental model, the state could have sustained around 250,000 acres of traditional agroecosystems, which would have boosted its food production to more than one million metric tonnes of food annually.

"Our study really highlights the relevance of restoring Indigenous agricultural systems today," said Dr. Tamara Ticktin, professor of botany at UH Mānoa and co-author on the study, in a press statement. "These systems are flexible and adaptive, and include both traditional and modern crops relevant today."

#### Challenges to Indigenous Crop Production

While we understand that growing Indigenous crops is good for the environment, produces nutritious food, and improves the well-being of our Native population, there are many challenges that impede efforts to increase production of Indigenous crops.

One of the biggest challenges is that many Indigenous crops are highly susceptible to disease. An example of this is kalo (taro), where Indigenous kalo strains get wiped out by blight but non-Indigenous varieties have shown to be resistant. Similarly, now that ‘ulu (breadfruit) and māmaki (*Pipturus albidus* - a plant made into Hawaiian tea) are becoming commercial crops (especially monocrops), we are starting to see pests and diseases come out that haven’t impacted them before.

Another challenge in increasing production of Indigenous crops is the high cost of land, water, machinery, infrastructure improvements, and labor in Hawai‘i. Due to these high costs, it is difficult for Indigenous crop farmers to be profitable in Hawai‘i, especially when they are competing with imported, non-indigenous food products. Our Native starches, kalo (taro), ‘ulu (breadfruit), and ‘uala all compete against much cheaper imported starches such as rice, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and processed starches like bread and pasta, while other Native crops such as banana and coconut compete with imported versions that are available at much cheaper prices.

Because of the high cost of producing Indigenous crops here in Hawai‘i and the struggle with access and affordability to these crops (as mentioned above), the customer base for farmers is limited. One way to address this issue is to support the development of food hubs, which

aggregate products from multiple farms and sell the products to customers. Aggregation increases the supply for the food hubs' customers, increases the market size and stability for farmers, and allows larger institutions to source products locally. This supports the State of Hawai'i's goals to increase procurement of local food products by departments, such as the Department of Education and others, better enabling programs such as Farm-to-School.

For these reasons, we encourage Congress to help increase the production of indigenous crops by:

- Improving access to capital for mitigation efforts to protect Indigenous crops from biological threats such as diseases, pests, and invasive species.
- Expanding support to food hubs that are the backbone of small farmers - including Indigenous and minority farmers.
- Incentivizing farmers to grow native crops, including kalo (taro), 'ulu (breadfruit), mai'a (native banana), and other Native Hawaiian staples.

### **Improving the Resiliency of Native Communities' Food Systems**

In response to rising levels of insecurity, complexity, and vulnerability in our lives, we focus on growing our resiliency. Resiliency refers to our collective ability to respond and recover from adverse conditions, including natural disasters, public health crises, economic hardship, consolidation of power, and cultural loss. We can become more resilient by preparing for and adapting to shocks in our food system and cultivating diverse, local and regional economies.

One way we can do this is by supporting the locally grown crops unique to specific regions throughout the country, which are major contributors to local and regional economies and food systems. For example, two of our largest producing crops in Hawai'i are macadamia nuts and coffee. In 2021, nearly 7,000 acres of coffee was harvested in Hawai'i, yielding an estimated 23.8m lbs. In 2020, nearly 17,000 acres of macadamia nuts were harvested, yielding 49m lbs. On Kamehameha Schools' land, tenants grew approximately 1,900 acres of coffee and 1,700 acres of macadamia nuts, producing nearly 7 million lbs of coffee and 4 million lbs of macadamia nuts. While these are not Indigenous crops for Native Hawaiians, the production of these crops helps support the collective food system and local economy that includes Indigenous crops.

For these reasons, we encourage Congress to support growing the resiliency of our Native communities' food system by:

- Support policy to celebrate and grow each state's unique locally grown crops; and
- Supporting policy that protects the authenticity of Hawai'i made products.

### **Conclusion**

We are grateful for this roundtable discussion, which we hope will lead to greater ongoing conversations to improve the food systems that serve Native Hawaiians and all Indigenous peoples across the country.

Founded in 1887, Kamehameha Schools is an educational organization striving to restore our people through education and advance a thriving Lāhui where all Native Hawaiians are successful, grounded in traditional values, and leading in the local and global communities. We believe that community success is individual success, Hawaiian culture-based education leads to academic success and local leadership drives global leadership. Hānai i ke keiki, ola ka lāhui; nurture the child, and the people thrive.