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## Healthy economy depends on a healthy environment

*By Deanna Spooner*

Now that President Obama has been sworn into office, his administration and Congress have before them the challenge of finessing the details of the federal economic stimulus package, also known as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Hawaii's congressional delegates should keep in mind that here, more than anywhere else in the U.S., a healthy economy depends on a healthy environment.

Without abundant forests, clean streams and productive seas, the first Polynesian ancestors to these shores would not have remained and thrived. Today, we are equally dependent on these natural assets for tourism, commerce, agriculture, fishing, cultural practices, recreation and spiritual solace. In turn, Hawaii's native birds, plants, fish and marine mammals depend on us to protect them from habitat loss, alien pests and pollution.

The federal economic stimulus package is even more important now than a few months ago when proposed state budget cuts first threatened many critical environmental programs, putting at risk the hard-earned gains we have made in recent years on invasive species control, watershed restoration and endangered species habitat protection.

The state faces a major budget shortfall, prompting proposals by Gov. Linda Lingle and the Legislature to divert money from special funds, including those set up specifically for natural resource protection and enhancement: the Natural Area Reserve Fund and the Land Conservation Fund. These two special funds already have taken a hit due to the sluggish housing market (a portion of the real property conveyance tax is deposited into the two special funds at the Department of Land and Natural Resources). The Natural Area Reserve Fund alone has declined from \$12 million in FY 2007 to a projected \$6 million in FY 2009, with further cuts projected through 2011. Any diversions from these funds will hamstring vital environmental programs. The federal stimulus package provides the only remaining hope of reviving and sustaining these programs over the next several years.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is designed to create jobs and invest in priorities like healthcare, education and energy. The national commitment to clean energies and energy efficiency is long overdue, but we cannot lose sight of the backlog of work needed to protect and restore our natural resources.

Here are just three examples of important programs needed to maintain thriving ecosystems and a robust economy in Hawaii:

- **Watershed restoration partnerships:** Watershed restoration on the main Hawaiian Islands involves many alliances of state and federal agencies, landowners and conservation organizations working to protect forested watersheds for water recharge and conservation values. Funding of \$6.5 million would support nearly 200 jobs for projects such as installing and maintaining protective fences, removing and controlling invasive plants and animals, providing fire suppression, recovering imperiled native species and protecting and restoring water resources.
- **Invasive species committees:** This statewide program involves state and federal agencies, the

counties, and grass-roots partners working in each county to respond to and control incipient invasive species. Funding of \$8.5 million would support 110 jobs focused on targeting non-native invasive plant and animal species that threaten Hawai'i's endangered species, environment, economy, human health and lifestyle.

- Invasive algae removal: The construction and operation of new algae "supersucker" barges to clean up Hawai'i's coral reefs and restore our fisheries would cost \$3 million over three years, provide 14 jobs, and help in the restoration of once-abundant fishing areas such as Kane'ohe Bay, Maunalua Bay, Waikiki on O'ahu; south Moloka'i; and Ma'alaea Bay on Maui.

The beauty that surrounds us belies that Hawai'i's environment is in trouble. The magnificent Ko'olau mountains are covered in green, yet our native forests are overrun by invasive plants brought in from far-away continents, affecting our watersheds' ability to provide habitat for Hawai'i's native species and clean, fresh water for its people. No longer can you see Hawai'i's only native duck, the koloa maoli, in wetlands throughout the main islands; you must search for them in isolated pockets on Hawai'i island, Kaua'i and Ni'ihau. And reefs throughout the archipelago share in the devastating loss of Hawai'i's once-abundant fisheries.

Vision and leadership from Hawai'i's elected officials are needed on this issue for all our sakes, but particularly for those who cannot vote — the endangered palila and monk seal, the honu and the silversword. We owe it to ourselves, our ancestors, and our children's children to make sure that our native forests, free-flowing streams, and coral reefs do not disappear forever, or else the heart and soul of Hawai'i will go extinct.

*Deanna Spooner is executive director of the Hawai'i Conservation Alliance & Hawai'i Conservation Alliance Foundation. She wrote this commentary for The Advertiser.*

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