
[EXTERNAL] Impacts of Water Diversion on Maui Agriculture, Ecosystems, & Cultural Practices

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To DLNR.BLNR.Testimony <blnr.testimony@hawaii.gov>

Aloha, my name is Mya Pilila‘au, and I am a Maui County resident and high school student. I am writing this testimony to raise major concerns about the continuous water diversion from East Maui stream and the lasting effects it has on the environment, local agriculture, and traditional Hawaiian cultural practices. I implore decision makers to be in support of the restoration of freshwater stream flow and take into serious consideration implementing sustainable water management policies.

I am in support of policies that restore East Maui water flows, limit water diversion to major corporations, and prioritize water access to local farmers and the ‘āina.

Major corporations like Alexander and Baldwin and its East Maui Irrigation Company have been diverting water from multiple East Maui streams through a large system of tunnels. Through decades of water diversion that was originally built to support the cane sugar industry, the impacts have been extremely damaging to the local environment. These water diversions move millions of gallons of water from streams, with A&B losing “an average of 41 million gallons per day, mostly due to unlined reservoirs and aging pipes,” as it is said from the Sierra Club of Hawai‘i.

Reduced stream flow highly limits the water that is available for traditional farming practices like lo‘i kalo. The streams that once supported wetland fields and crops are now drained, leading to a significant loss in irrigated kalo and crop production. Local farmers and members of the community have even testified that continuous diversions have resulted in farmers being forced to shut down their productions.

Decades of water diversion in Maui have left streamflows permanently damaged with diminished flows, which harms native flora and fauna that depend on these natural resources for survival. It is noted that the state Commission on Water Resource Management has requested that changes to some diversion structures be made to protect the instream uses, but “implementation of these orders has been slow, risking ongoing ecological harm, quoted from the Sierra Club of Hawai‘i article on East Maui Streams.

When water is diverted from its natural path, important aspects of Hawai‘i, like traditional farming and even cultural practice, use of water resources is permanently altered. Community testimonies and advocacy efforts have dedicated decades of their best efforts to heal waterways and ensure that water rights are prioritized for Hawai‘i’s lāhui.

I respectfully request that your office support the following:

1. Restoration of stream flows in historically diverted East Maui watersheds to the greatest extent possible.
2. Strengthened environmental and cultural impact assessments prior to permitting or renewing any water diversion structures.
3. Water access prioritization for local, diversified agriculture and traditional farming systems over large-scale diversion for distant uses.
4. Increased transparency and community engagement in decisions regarding Maui's water resources.

Ola i ka wai. Water is life. The decades of water diversion on East Maui have caused irreparable damage already, and it is time to put a stop to it. Acting on evidence of these impacts is vital to right the wrongs that the 'āina and wai have experienced.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony.

Sincerely,

Mya Pililaau