

State of Hawaii
DEPARTMENT OF LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES
Division of Aquatic Resources
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

May 22, 2026

Board of Land and Natural Resources
State of Hawaii
Honolulu, Hawaii

SUBJECT: Request Approval to Enter into a Federally Funded Project Agreement between the Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) and the Research Corporation of the University of Hawaii (RCUH) for the Division of Aquatic Resources (DAR) Research Project Entitled "Waiakea Public Fishing Area (PFA) Fishery Monitoring and Enhancement."

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Approval is requested to enter into a new Project Agreement between DLNR-DAR and RCUH. The Project Agreement, entitled "Waiakea Public Fishing Area (PFA) Fishery Monitoring and Enhancement," is scheduled to run from October 1, 2026 through September 30, 2027. The Project Agreement provides \$145,000 in Federal funds from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sport Fish Restoration Program. The Project Agreement allows DAR to secure assistance from RCUH to meet project goals and objectives efficiently and in a timely manner.

Project Objectives

This project will educate and engage both local and visiting communities in pono fishing practices while conducting research to facilitate the management of the Public Fishing Area (PFA) at Waiakea in Hilo on Hawaii Island. The objectives of this project are:

- 1) Conduct rearing efforts of 'ama'ama (striped mullet) and other estuarine sport fish to support stocking efforts.
- 2) Stock 'ama'ama and other estuarine sport fish.
- 3) Educate local and visiting anglers on pono fishing practices as they engage in seasonal fishing experiences.
- 4) Conduct fish surveys to assess the health and growth of 'ama'ama and other estuarine sport fish populations during rearing and stocking activities.
- 5) Collaborate with local fishers to collect data and make observations to assess the health of the fishery.
- 6) Conduct creel surveys to monitor the utilization of the Waiakea PFA and assess angler catch efforts.
- 7) Conduct genetic studies to assess the population structure of hatchery-raised vs. wild 'ama'ama.

Duration

The Project Agreement is scheduled to run from October 1, 2026 through September 30, 2027.

Funding Source

Federal funds in the amount of \$145,000.00 from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sport Fish Restoration Program.

HRS Chapter 343 - Compliance with Environmental Law

This Project Agreement will continue to involve the use of state lands (submerged lands zoned in the Conservation District, Resource subzone) and use of state funds. The Department has determined that the actions to be conducted under the project will have little or no significant effect on the environment and are exempt from the preparation of an environmental assessment. See the Division's proposed Determination of Exemption from the preparation of an environmental assessment (attached).

REMARKS

There is a need for DAR to educate local and visiting anglers on pono fishing practices while providing engaging estuarine fishing experiences in the Waiakea PFA. Research and monitoring of estuarine sport-fish populations and utilization of these fish resources are needed, as well as training for future generations to continue this effort. The education and research efforts DAR plans to conduct will facilitate fishery management of the Waiakea PFA, preserve estuarine fishing experiences, and provide a means of subsistence to the communities DAR serves. A map of the project site is attached.

Approval to enter into this Project Agreement is being requested concurrently from the Governor, through the Department of Budget and Finance. Also, the Project Agreement is being prepared for submission to the Attorney General's Office for preliminary approval as to form and content. DAR is aware that the implementation of this Project Agreement depends on the receipt of all required approvals and the availability of funds, and that funding restrictions may occur at any time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discussion, the Division of Aquatic Resources requests:

1. That the Board, based on the attached proposed Declaration of Exemption prepared after consultation with and on advice of those having similar expertise in exemption determinations for the proposed actions under the Project Agreement, declare that the actions which are anticipated to be undertaken under this Project Agreement will have little or no significant effect on the environment and are therefore exempt from the preparation of an environmental assessment;
2. That the Board authorize the Chairperson to approve and execute the Division of Aquatic Resources Project Agreement entitled "Waiakea Public Fishing Area (PFA) Fishery Monitoring and Enhancement," with the Research Corporation of the University of Hawaii, subject to approval as to form and content by the Department of the Attorney General; and
3. That the Board delegates to the Chairperson the authority to:

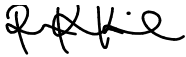
- a. Approve and execute all future Division of Aquatic Resources Project Agreements and forthcoming amendments with the Research Corporation of the University of Hawaii, subject to approval as to form and content by the Department of the Attorney General; and
- b. When appropriate, declare that actions that are anticipated to be undertaken under these Project Agreements will have little or no significant effect on the environment and are therefore exempt from the preparation of an environmental assessment.

Respectfully submitted,



BRIAN J. NEILSON
Administrator

APPROVED FOR SUBMITTAL:



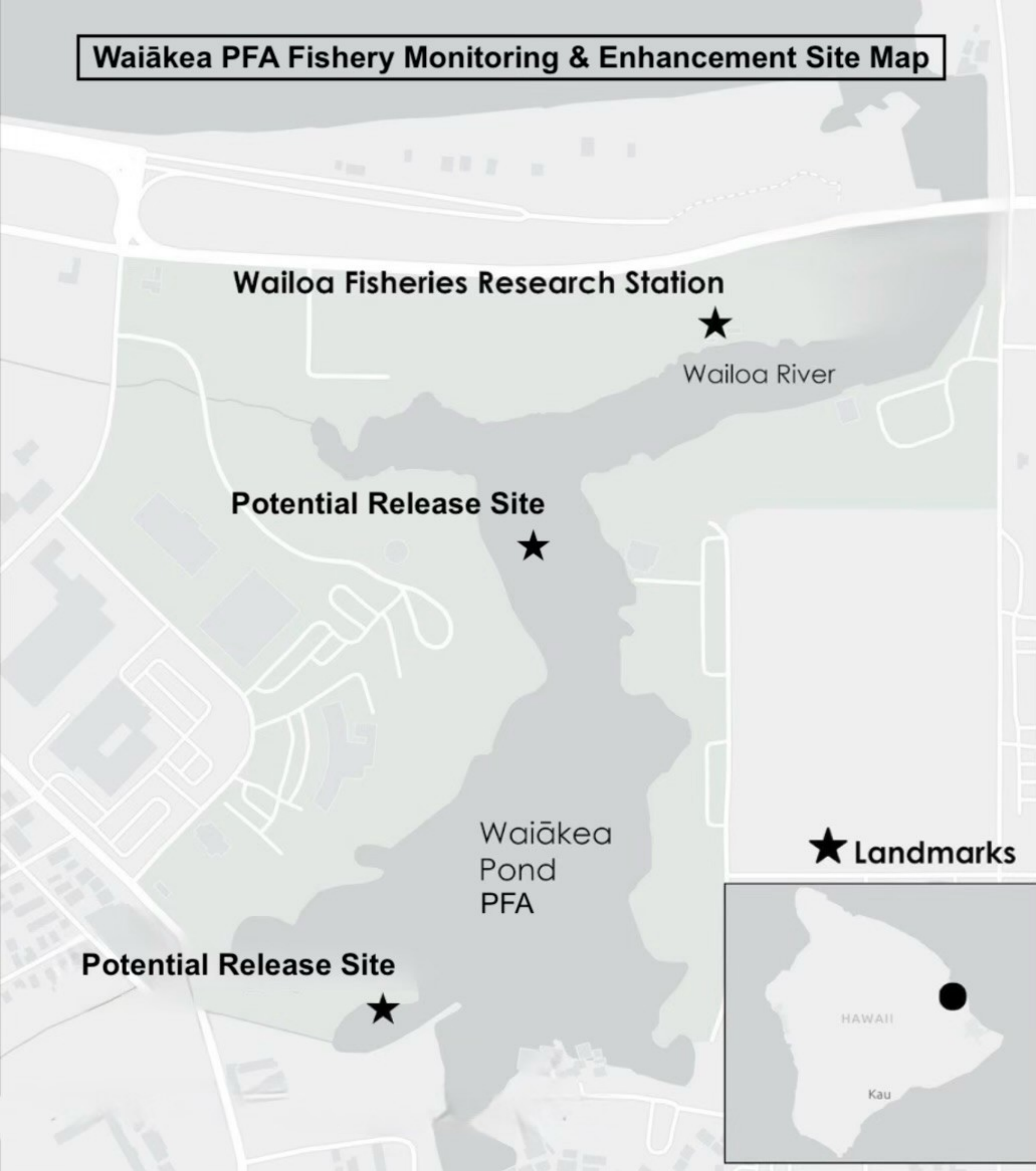
RYAN K. P. KANAKA'OLE
Acting Chairperson

Attachment

Map of project site

Declaration of Exemption - Waiakea Public Fishing Area (PFA) Fishery Monitoring and Enhancement

Waiākea PFA Fishery Monitoring & Enhancement Site Map



Wailoa Fisheries Research Station

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Wailoa River

Potential Release Site

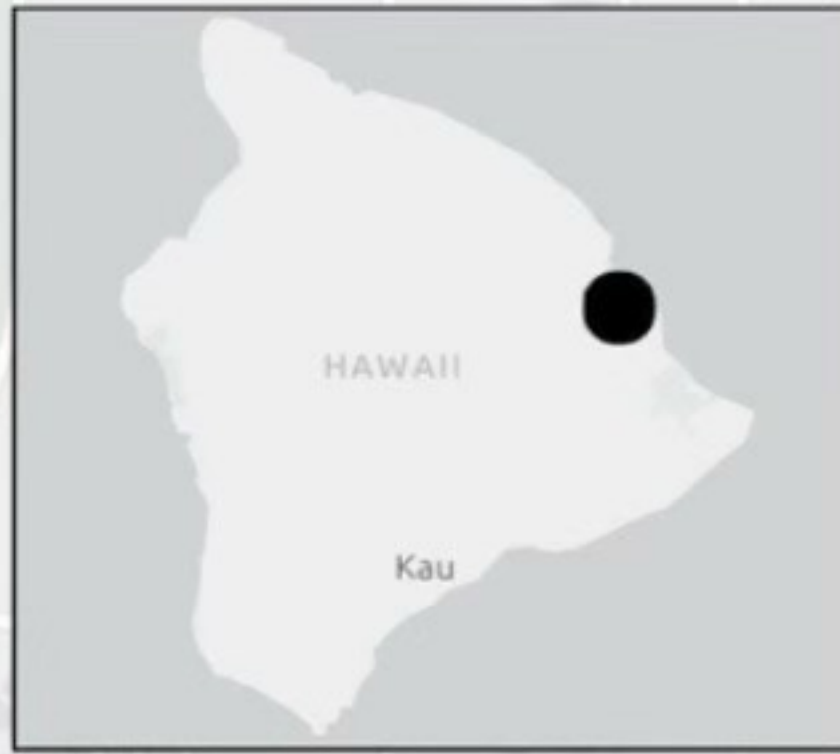
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Waiākea
Pond
PFA

★ Landmarks

Potential Release Site

★



0.25

Miles



Datum: WGS 1984 Author: Andrew Tabaque
Projection: Mercator Auxiliary Sphere

JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR | KE KIA'ĀINA

SYLVIA LUKE
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR | KA HOPE KIA'ĀINA



STATE OF HAWAII | KA MOKU'ĀINA 'O HAWAI'I
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HISTORIC PRESERVATION
KAHOOLAWE ISLAND RESERVE COMMISSION
LAND
STATE PARKS

May 22, 2026

TO: Division of Aquatic Resources File

THROUGH: Ryan K.P. Kanaka'ole, Acting Chairperson

FROM: Brian J. Neilson, Administrator
Division of Aquatic Resources

Handwritten signature of Ryan K.P. Kanaka'ole.

Handwritten signature of Brian J. Neilson.

SUBJECT: Declaration of Exemption from the Preparation of an Environmental Assessment under the Authority of Chapter 343, HRS, and Chapter 11-200.1, HAR, for a Request for Approval to Enter into a Federally Funded Project Agreement between the Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) and the Research Corporation of the University of Hawaii (RCUH) for the Division of Aquatic Resources (DAR) Research Project Entitled "Waiakea Public Fishing Area (PFA) Fishery Monitoring and Enhancement."

The following Project Agreement activities are found to be exempted from preparation of an environmental assessment under the authority of Chapter 343, Hawaii Revised Statutes (HRS) and Chapter 11-200.1, Hawaii Administrative Rules (HAR):

Project Title: Waiakea PFA Fishery Monitoring & Enhancement

Project Description:

There is a need for DAR to educate local and visiting anglers on pono fishing practices while providing engaging estuarine fishing experiences in the Waiakea PFA. Research and monitoring of estuarine sport-fish populations and utilization of these fish resources are needed, as well as training for future generations to continue this effort. The education and research efforts DAR plans to conduct will facilitate fishery management of the Waiakea PFA, preserve estuarine fishing experiences, and provide a means of subsistence to the communities DAR serves.

The objectives of this Project Agreement are as follows:

- 1) Conduct rearing efforts of 'ama'ama (*Mugil cephalus* or "striped mullet") and other estuarine sport fish to support stocking efforts.
- 2) Stock 'ama'ama and other estuarine sport fish.

- 3) Educate local and visiting anglers on pono fishing practices as they engage in seasonal fishing experiences.
- 4) Conduct fish surveys to assess the health and growth of 'ama'ama and other estuarine sport fish populations during rearing and stocking activities.
- 5) Collaborate with local fishers to collect data and make observations to assess the health of the fishery.
- 6) Conduct creel surveys to monitor the utilization of the Waiakea PFA and assess angler catch efforts.
- 7) Conduct genetic studies to assess the population structure of hatchery-raised vs. wild 'ama'ama.

The project staff will implement the following measures during fish rearing, stocking, monitoring, and facility improvement efforts to minimize cumulative impact:

Fish Rearing & Stocking

DAR Hilo will determine if they can rear and sustain a variety of fish at the Wailoa Fisheries Research Station. The focus will be on pua'ama (juvenile *Mugil cephalus*). Other species could include moi (*Polydactylus sexfilis*), āholehole (*Kuhlia xenura*), and manini (*Acanthurus triostegus*). These fish will be caught in the wild using fine-mesh scoop nets and, if necessary, fine-mesh cast nets. Fish will be housed in an open system within 2500-gallon aquaculture tanks with a diameter of 12 feet. These fish will be fed a varied diet, which includes the diatom *Melosira moniliformis*, commercial fish feed, nori, romaine lettuce, introduced bait fish in the Poeciliidae family (guppies and mollies), and native algal species. Reared fish will be housed for no more than six months. After six months, DAR will release these fish that were taken from the wild into the Waiakea PFA. Before release, the fish will be examined by a certified veterinarian and released only if deemed healthy and fit. Fish that are not suitable for release will be euthanized humanely.

DAR will acquire striped mullets that are about 6 cm in size. DAR has identified two options for obtaining these fish: 1) Fingerlings spawned and hatched from wild broodstock of known origin at the Pacific Aquaculture and Coastal Resources Center (PACRC), or 2) collecting fingerlings from the wild using cast nets. Once DAR obtains the fingerlings, they will begin the grow-out and husbandry process at the station. If DAR collects fish from the wild, they may need to start by feeding them algae, such as the diatom *Melosira moniliformis*, before transitioning them to commercially produced fish food. DAR's goal at this stage is for the fish to reach approximately 15 cm in size.

To address potential community concerns about fish diseases, DAR will engage a qualified veterinarian to inspect the 'ama'ama before their release during this second phase. One option is to collaborate with the Veterinary Laboratory of the Hawaii Department of Agriculture's Animal Industry Division. Another possibility is to consult with the private sector.

Lastly, DAR will conduct the release of grown-out striped mullet. Before this release, DAR will determine the logistics required for transporting and releasing the fish and prepare accordingly. DAR will determine if it has the appropriate containers and supplies to safely transport the fish and evaluate multiple places for establishing suitable release sites.

Fish Monitoring

All fish involved in this project, whether it be during the first phase to determine if DAR can sustain a variety of species or during the second phase when DAR will be growing out ‘ama‘ama, will be monitored daily for health, growth, vigor, and feeding response. If fish are determined to be in subpar condition, steps will be taken to improve their health and determine the cause(s) impacting their health. Depending on the perceived issue, this may require water quality monitoring and adjustments, removing fish from the tanks for close inspections, conducting autopsies on deceased fish, shipping samples to a veterinarian, or an on-site inspection by a veterinarian.

Monitoring of ‘ama‘ama that have been released in association with this project is critical to measuring the success and impacts of fish release efforts. To achieve this, DAR will first conduct a tagging assessment to determine the most suitable method for tagging all ‘ama‘ama prior to their release. Conventional methods, such as coded wire tags, have been used in the past; however, DAR intends to explore alternative tagging methods that may be more effective. This assessment will start with a literature review of tagging options, followed by actual tagging trials of striped mullet. After a preferred tagging option has been identified, all ‘ama‘ama that are scheduled for release during the second phase of the project will be tagged.

Although the release of tagged fish will coincide with the end of the yearly funding cycle for this project, the tagged fish will enable a comprehensive monitoring effort of released fish in the next phase of the project. Although not included in this proposal, but rather in a future proposal, the monitoring will likely involve interacting with fishers at the Wailoa estuary to assess their catch and determine if it includes fish associated with this project.

Facility Improvements

The Wailoa Fisheries Research Station is in Hilo on the East Side of Hawai‘i Island. While the Station primarily supports field projects and surveys, the aquaculture operations and facilities have been inactive for almost a decade. Recognizing the facility’s potential, resources have been allocated to restore the aging aquaculture system to full functionality. Recent improvements include a new aluminum standing seam roof, structural repairs to the raceway and supporting steel posts, an additional 10’ x 32’ office trailer, and the purchase of replacement pumps, blowers, sand filter systems, piles, and various supplies to replace our aquaculture system. Additionally, planned work includes electrical upgrades and the installation of a photovoltaic system to supplement the increased power requirements that will arise when aquaculture operations commence. DAR will complete all planned improvements, activate the aquaculture system, troubleshoot any technical issues, and assess the necessary adjustments or modifications to support fish grow-out and husbandry. Additionally, DAR intends to collaborate with the new Ānuenue Fisheries Research Center biologist, who specializes in aquaculture operations, to receive technical guidance and advice for Hilo’s aquaculture system. DAR also plans to travel to Oahu to learn about other aquaculture systems, methods, and procedures that can be applied to operations at the Wailoa Fisheries Research Station.

Consulted parties: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Sport Fish Restoration Program

Exemption Determination: After reviewing §11-200.1-15, HAR, and DLNR’s departmental exemption list approved on November 10, 2020, including the criteria used to determine significance under §§11-200.1-13, HAR, DLNR has concluded that the activities under this Project Agreement would have minimal or no significant effect on the environment and that approval of the Project Agreement is categorically exempt from the requirement to prepare an environmental assessment based on the following analysis:

1. All activities associated with this Project Agreement have been evaluated as a single action. Since this Project Agreement involves activities that are precedent to a later planned activity, i.e., fish rearing, stocking, and monitoring, along with minor facility improvements, the categorical exemption determination here will treat all planned activities as a single action under § 11-200.1-10, HAR.
2. The General Exemption Type #3 for Construction/Modification of Facilities or Structures Appears to Apply. § 11-200.1-15(c)(3), HAR, exempts the class of actions that involve “construction and location of single new, small facilities or structures and the alteration and modification of the facilities or structures and installation of new, small equipment and facilities and the modification of the equipment or facilities....” This exemption class has been interpreted to include the construction and replacement of fish tanks and a photovoltaic system for the Waiakea PFA Fishery Monitoring & Enhancement project.

The proposed activities here appear to fall squarely under the exemption class identified under § 11-200.1-15(c)(3), HAR, and as described under the revised 2020 DLNR Exemption List (Concurred on by the Environmental Council on November 10, 2020) under General Exemption Type 3 (Part 1), item #14 , which includes “Construction or placement of utilities (telecommunications, electrical, **solar panels**, drainage, waterlines, sewers) and related equipment (such as transformers, poles, cables, wires, pipes) accessory to existing facilities“ (emphasis added)..”¹

3. The General Exemption Type #5 for Basic Data Collection and Scientific Research with no Serious or Major Environmental Disturbance Appears to Apply. § 11-200.1-15(c)(5), HAR, exempts the class of actions that involve “basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource and infrastructure testing and evaluation activities that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.” This exemption class has been interpreted to include the data collection, research and resource evaluation activities, such as those being proposed for the Waiakea Fishery Monitoring & Enhancement project.

The proposed activities here appear to fall squarely under the exemption class identified under § 11-200.1-15(c)(5), HAR, and as described under the revised 2020 DLNR exemption list (Concurred on by the Environmental Council on November 10, 2020) under General Exemption Type #5 (Part 1), items #13 and #14, which includes “research that the

¹ Exemption list for DLNR, approved on November 10, 2020. See Office of Environmental Quality Control (OEQC) website: http://oeqc2.doh.hawaii.gov/Agency_Exemption_Lists/State-Department-of-Land-and-Natural-Resources-Exemption-List-2020-11-10.pdf

DLNR/RCUH Project Agreement – Waiakea & Wahiawa PFA Fishery Monitoring & Enhancement

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Department declares is designed specifically to monitor, conserve, or enhance native species or native species' habitat” and “implanting transponders and affixing tags, transmitters, markers, or other similar devices to birds, mammals, invertebrates, or aquatic organisms to record movement, longevity, growth, distribution, behavior, and other activities. .”² Additionally, class # 5 (Part 2) item #4 applies which exempts “Experimental management actions that the Department declares are designed specifically to monitor, conserve, or enhance native species or native species’ habitat.”.

As discussed below, no significant disturbance to any environmental resource is anticipated. Thus, so long as the below considerations are met, the general exemption types should include the action now contemplated.

4. The General Exemption Type #1 for Operations, Repairs, or Maintenance of Existing Structures or Facilities Involving Minor Expansion or Minor Change of Use Beyond that Previously Existing Appears to Apply. § 11-200.1-15(c)(5), HAR, exempts the class of actions that involve “operations, repairs or maintenance of existing structures, facilities, equipment, or topographical features, involving minor expansion or minor change of use beyond that previously existing.” This exemption class has been interpreted to include the construction of fish tanks and the replacement/upgrade of various aquaculture equipment (e.g. pumps, filters), such as those being proposed for the Waiakea Fishery Monitoring & Enhancement project.

The proposed activities here appear to fall squarely under the exemption class identified under § 11-200.1-15(c)(5), HAR, and as described under the revised 2020 DLNR exemption list (Concurred on by the Environmental Council on November 10, 2020) under General Exemption Type #1 (Part 1), item #6, which includes “Operation, repair and maintenance of existing fisheries facilities, involving capture, containment, sustaining, experimentation, and husbandry of various freshwater, estuarine, and marine fishes, invertebrates, and other aquatic organisms.”

5. Cumulative Impacts of Actions in the Same Place and Impacts with Respect to the Potentially Particularly Sensitive Environment Will Not Be Significant. Even where a categorical exemption appears to include a proposed action, the action cannot be declared exempt if “the cumulative impact of planned successive actions in the same place, over time, is significant, or when an action that is normally insignificant in its impact on the environment may be significant in a particularly sensitive environment.” §11-200.1-15(d), HAR. To gauge whether a significant impact or effect is probable, an exempting agency must consider every phase of a proposed action, any expected primary and secondary consequences, the long-term and short-term effects of the action, the overall and cumulative effect of the action, and the sum effects of an action on the quality of the environment. §11-200.1-13, HAR.

² Exemption list for DLNR, approved on November 10, 2020. See Office of Environmental Quality Control (OEQC) website: http://oeqc2.doh.hawaii.gov/Agency_Exemption_Lists/State-Department-of-Land-and-Natural-Resources-Exemption-List-2020-11-10.pdf

DLNR/RCUH Project Agreement – Waiakea & Wahiawa PFA Fishery Monitoring & Enhancement

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Significant cumulative impacts are not anticipated as a result of this fish stocking, rearing, tagging, and monitoring activity along with its associated facility upgrades, and numerous safeguards further ensure that any potentially sensitive environment of the project area will not be significantly affected. All stocking, rearing, tagging, and monitoring activities will be conducted in a manner that does not diminish marine resources, qualities, and ecological integrity, or have any indirect, secondary, cultural, or cumulative effects.

Since no significant cumulative impacts or significant impacts with respect to any particularly sensitive aspect of the project area are anticipated, the categorical exemptions identified above should remain applicable.

7. Overall Impacts will Probably have No Significant Effect on the Environment. Any foreseeable impacts from the proposed activity will be further mitigated by general and specific conditions attached to the Project Agreement. Specifically, all activities covered by this Project Agreement will be carried out with strict safeguards for the natural, historic, and cultural resources of the area, alongside all other applicable laws, agency policies, and standard operating procedures.

Conclusion. Upon consideration of the Project Agreement to be approved by the Board of Land and Natural Resources, the potential effects of the above listed project as provided by Chapter 343, HRS and Chapter 11-200.1 HAR, have been determined to be of probable minimal or no significant effect on the environment and exempt from the preparation of an environmental assessment.