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Hawaii Cattlemen's Council, Inc.

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Comments: Hawaii Cattlemen's Council Inc., by Alan Gottlieb, President March 6, 2009
 Regarding: Document ID: CCC_FRDOC_0001-0065, Document: Title Environmental Quality Incentive Program

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments regarding Document ID: CCC_FRDOC_0001-0065, Document: Title Environmental Quality Incentive Program.

The Hawaii Cattlemen's Council, Inc. has serious concerns over the language currently in this Bill which appears to disqualify farmers, ranchers and forestry operations from qualifying for EQIP if they farm or ranch entirely on public lands.

My name is Alan Gottlieb, and I am the President of the Hawaii Cattlemen's Council. The Hawaii Cattlemen's Council, Inc. (HCC) is the Statewide umbrella organization comprised of the five county level Cattlemen's Associations. Our 130+ member ranchers represent over 60,000 head of beef cows; more than 75% of all the beef cows in the State. Ranchers are the stewards of over 1 Million acres of land in Hawaii, 25% of the State's total land mass.

The Bill's language includes the following:

and (jii) The conservation practices to be implemented on the public land are necessary and will contribute to an improvement in the identified resource concern that is on private land

It is our understanding that NRCS is interpreting this language to mean that EQIP funding would only be available for use on public lands when those lands were part of an agriculture or non-industrial forest operation that also consisted of private lands that would also benefit from the practice. If that is the accurate interpretation then approximately 50% of all of Hawaii's ranches, which currently have their operations on approximately 250,000 acres of public lands would be disqualified from EQIP participation. The loss of EQIP funding for these operations could foreseeably result in their demise particularly in these fragile economic times. The loss of such a large segment of the industry would likely have a domino effect on the balance of the industry when critical mass is lost and industry tangibles such as cooperatives, processing facilities, supply companies, transportation equipment, markets and such can no longer be supported by the remaining segment thereby causing the demise of the balance of the industry.

Hawaii is particularly vulnerable to the losses of this program given its very unique and fragile environments, limited island resources, our geographic isolation and our recognized need to become more food and energy self sufficient. EQIP has been paramount to the success of our farmers and ranchers providing incentives for them to invest their own matching resources to protect the environment and natural resources while striving to sustain local food production. Significant efforts are being made in both our agriculture and forestry industries to achieve for the State at least a certain level of self sufficiency.

UNIFIED AFFILIATE OF THE NATIONAL CATTLEMEN'S BEEF ASSOCIATION

Hawaii Cattlemen's Association • Kauai Cattlemen's Association • Maui Cattlemen's Association
 Molokai Grazier's Association • Oahu Cattlemen's Association

To remedy this situation and keep farms, ranches and forest production viable in Hawaii we ask that this section of the Bill be amended to allow for farmers, ranchers and forestry operators that have their entire operation on government lands qualify for EQIP. If an amendment which would affect the entire nation is not feasible we ask that a special consideration exemption be made for Hawaii given our geographic isolation, limited resources, fragile environments and the critical need to develop self sufficiency in food and energy production.

The following is our feedback from NRCS Hawaii on NRCS's national interpretation of the language:

(c) Eligible land includes agricultural land and nonindustrial private forest land, and other land on which agricultural products, livestock, or forest-related products are produced and resource concerns may be addressed. Other agricultural lands include cropped woodland, marshes, incidental areas included in the agricultural operation, and other types of agricultural land used for production of livestock. However, land may be considered for enrollment in EQIP only if NRCS determines that the land is:

(1) Privately owned land;

(2) Publicly owned land where:

(i) The land is a working component of the participant's agricultural and forestry operation, and

(ii) The participant has control of the land for the term of the contract, and

(iii) The conservation practices to be implemented on the public land are necessary and will contribute to an improvement in the identified resource concern that is on private land; or

(3) Indian land

This was discussed at length at our PIA field staff meeting yesterday. As it is written right now, it is being interpreted to mean that unless an applicant is operating on both private and public land and the practices to be implemented will address a resource concern that benefits both the private and the public lands, the land is ineligible. So, for example, let's say someone has both a private and State lease. The parcels are adjacent to each other and both are managed together under the same operating unit and have the same resource concerns. We believe those lands could be eligible because the privately leased lands are "private" lands and the practices implemented on the public lands would be part of a system of practices to address resource concerns that would also benefit the private lands. But, if a rancher has part of his ranch on private lands, say in Kohala, and another separate public land parcel say, a Department of Hawaiian Homes Lands (DHHL) or Department of Land & Natural Resources (DLNR) lease say in Waimea, his DHHL lands would not be eligible for participation. This will also affect all farmers or ranchers with DLNR or Hawaii Department of Agriculture (HDOA) leases, including those farmers off the Lower Hamakua DRCh.