

## PACIFIC ISLANDS REPORT

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### *Feature*

#### **LOFTY PLANS FOR HAWAII'S KAHOOLAWE ISLAND**

By Ilima Loomis

MAUI, Hawaii (The Maui News, Dec. 4) – Nearly a year into his leadership of the Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission, Executive Director Sol Kaho'ohalahala has set a lofty target for Hawaii's former "target island."

His long-term vision: Turn the island devastated by years of bombing into a model of environmental sustainability and cultural healing for the entire state.

It's been a year of transition, with Kaho'ohalahala overseeing a major reorganization of the agency responsible for management of Maui County's smallest island. Those internal changes left many of the group's regular activities unattended, with the Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission spending less than a third of its US\$7 million budget for fiscal year 2005.

Now, Ka-ho'ohalahala is looking to the future, vowing to refocus on core programs like reforestation projects, resolve the island's infrastructure challenges, and develop a sustainable source of funding for the agency.

In the face of environmental, financial and logistical challenges, Kaho'ohalahala is confident he can reach his goal.

"Kahoolawe demonstrates the ability to heal, and it also demonstrates the will to survive," he says.

In his days as a state legislator, Kaho'ohalahala was often frustrated to see the environmental issues he championed neglected. Now he hopes the island of Kahoolawe could help future lawmakers find support for those causes.

He wants to see the Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission develop the island into a model of sustainability, using renewable energy sources to power operations and technology like reverse osmosis to provide clean water.

"It will be a great model to see that what was once the most devastated island in Hawaii is now a great example of a sustainable place," he said. "Perhaps Kahoolawe can help her sister islands."

Commissioner Burt Sakata of Maui supports that goal.

"Economically it makes sense, because it's very, very expensive to take fuel there," he said.

A part of Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission's mission Kaho'ohalahala never forgets is the state's pledge to hand the island over to Native Hawaiians after a self-governing entity is formed.

Long active in Hawaiian sovereignty issues, Kaho'ohalahala says he's excited to see the day when it's his turn to give up control of the island.

"It's only a matter of time before that entity will be allowed to come forward," he said.

Kahoolawe was used as a military bombing range for 50 years after it was taken over by the federal government at the start of World War II.

Prior to military occupation it had been leased to private ranchers, and there are signs that Native Hawaiians were using the island since 1000 A.D.

Native Hawaiians began protesting the military's use of Kahoolawe in the 1970s, and in 1981 it was added to the [National Register of Historic Places](#) as a result of a court-ordered archaeological survey.

Bombing was officially stopped in 1990 by an order from President George H.W. Bush, and three years later Congress ordered the U.S. Navy to do a 10-year, US\$400 million cleanup of the island before returning it to the State of Hawaii.

Kahoolawe was formally handed over to the state in 2003.

Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission was in the middle of a major reorganization when Kaho'ohalahala stepped in. In the wake of the island's handover from the Navy to the state, the agency was reassessing its entire mission and strategy after 10 years as an offshoot of the federal cleanup effort.

"Duties would change, how we were going to operate on the island would change, so everything had to change," Sakata said.

In his first six months, Kaho'ohalahala built a new team, increasing staff from 16 to 26 people.

He also helped the agency take on a new project, managing a US\$184,800 grant from the state Department of Health to restore and protect the Moa'ulanui watershed on the island, reducing silt-filled runoff by planting native vegetation in the loose, dusty soil.

Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission has since scored funding for a five-year, US\$1.5 million Clean Water project from the Health Department, involving more planting, along with stream and ocean water quality monitoring.

The Department of Health Moa'ulanui project fulfilled many of Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission's core missions, including reforestation, but it also distracted the agency from other programs and capital improvement projects that had been on the books.

Kaho'ohalahala acknowledged that some areas had been neglected as a result.

"It redirected a lot of our work efforts into the projects of the grant," he said.

Key projects that weren't completed included improvements to the campsite at Hakioawa, a small boat harbor feasibility study, and repair and maintenance to Kahoolawe's main road. A total of US\$900,000 was budgeted for the three projects, none of it spent in fiscal 2005. The money has been re-budgeted in fiscal 2006.

Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission also spent none of the US\$30,000 budgeted for enforcement coordination, none of the US\$14,000 budgeted for weather station maintenance, and only US\$568 out of US\$29,000 budgeted for alien species control.

"While these projects were all planned for and budgeted for, there was really no work done," Kaho'ohalahala said.

Although the Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission spent only US\$2 million out of US\$7 million budgeted in fiscal 2005, Kaho'ohalahala proposed no reductions in fiscal 2006. Instead the budget increased slightly to US\$7.4 million, reflecting the agency's increased staff.

Kaho'ohalahala said the budget was consciously inflated.

"I'm leaving a safe buffer," he said. "I don't anticipate we'll be spending anywhere near that amount."

It would also allow him to monitor different Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission programs to see how much money they actually used during the course of the year, he added.

Sakata said it had long been the commission's practice to budget more money than it needed, and then to see how much was left over at the end of the year.

"Almost every year of our budget we've under-spent," he said.

Weather, the discovery of unexploded ordnance, and other surprise factors can make it hard to predict which projects will be completed, he noted.

"It's not the greatest way to do it," he acknowledged. "You hope you'll be able to actually implement some of these programs and spend the money, but it just doesn't work out that way."

Financially, Kahoolawe's future is far from certain.

The agency was endowed with a portion of the federal money allocated for the Kahoolawe cleanup, and it has US\$29 million left in its trust fund, not including the US\$7.4 million budgeted for the current fiscal year. Although it is officially a state agency under the oversight of the Department of Land and Natural Resources, it receives no state funding aside from the grants it won from the Department of Health.

Kaho'ohalahala planned to attack the issue at multiple levels: reduce expenses to extend the life of the trust, continue to supplement the budget through government and private grants, and lobby for long-term funding from the state.

"I think it's clear that unless we find another source of funding, our programs will end when there's no money in our trust," he said.

Other options include partnerships, including a proposal to work with the University of Hawaii and public schools to help fulfill the commission's educational mission.

With Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission's endowment dwindling and future funding uncertain, the high cost of maintaining the island's base camp is a big concern. The camp was built by the Navy during its ordnance cleanup, at a time when money was plentiful and scores of sweaty, hungry workers were spending days at a time on the island.

It offers running water, lights, air conditioning and other amenities that are probably more luxurious than Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission staff need today, Kaho'ohalahala said.

The commission budgeted US\$1.2 million to run the camp in fiscal year 2006.

"The question is whether or not the need justifies the actual expense," he said.

He wanted to "downsize" to a simpler facility with just enough lighting, fresh water and fuel to live on when work trips on the island last overnight.

Since the Navy built no pier or landing strip on the island, transportation also continues to be a major expense. The Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission spent US\$518,000 on

helicopter transport in fiscal 2005, and budgeted US\$700,000 for the contract in the current fiscal year.

"We have sort of no choice at the moment," Sakata said. But Kahoolawe Island Reserve Commission is studying the feasibility of building a dock, which would make it safer and more affordable to bring people and materials to the island by boat.

"We really are looking toward doing more ocean travel," he said. "We think in the long run it could be more economical."

Sakata said he and other Kahoolawe commissioners are more than happy with Kaho'ohalahala's leadership.

"Sol has been a perfect fit for the commission," Sakata said.

Kaho'ohalahala's experience as a Maui County Council member and state legislator provided him crucial skills at working with government, and his history with the Protect Kahoolawe Ohana in the 1970s gave him a valuable history with the island.

"He understood all the issues," Sakata said.

Kaho'ohalahala's appointment as executive director a year ago ended an extended period of uncertainty at the commission. Longtime executive director Keoni Fairbanks had resigned earlier in 2004 for medical reasons. Acting Executive Director Stanton Enomoto had stepped down later in the year to take another position.

Even as Kaho'ohalahala takes aim at some big long-term goals for Kahoolawe, he also sees his tenure as a transition period for the island. In the end, his job is to get Kahoolawe ready for its next custodians, an independent Native Hawaiian entity.

"When that knock comes on Kahoolawe's door, I'd like to say, 'We're prepared to give Kahoolawe to you. We've made every effort to preserve the resources of the island for you.'"

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