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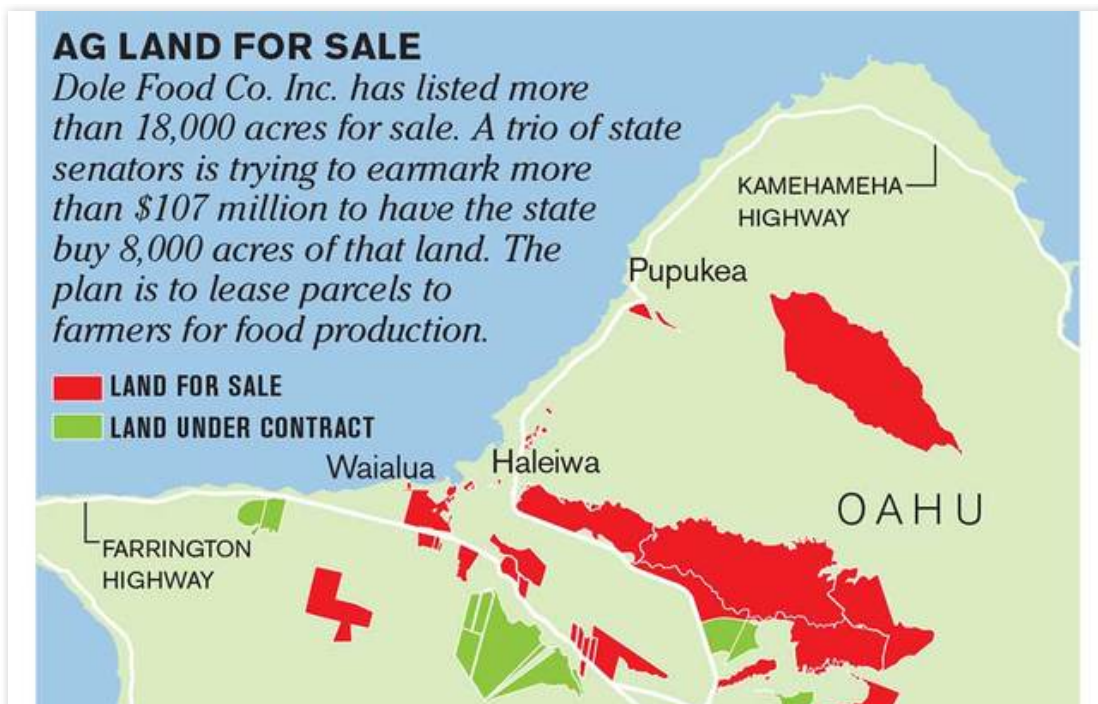
## Hawaii News

# Senators keen to buy Dole land

By [Kevin Dayton](#)

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A trio of state senators wants the state to buy about 8,000 acres of Dole Food Co. land between Central Oahu and the North Shore to preserve the property for agriculture — angling to earmark more than \$107 million in next year's budget to complete the purchase.

Senate Ways and Means Vice Chairman Donovan Dela Cruz said the plan is to have the state make the former sugar and pineapple lands available for long-term leasing to farmers for food production. Many of those lands are now fallow, while other parcels are being farmed under month-to-month leases, he said.

Dela Cruz argued that “if we’re serious about food production, if we’re serious about helping farmers with food safety, then the state needs to get involved and follow the mandate in the Constitution to preserve ag lands by purchasing it and thereby provide long-term leases to farmers.”

“Unfortunately, many parcels have been sold, and some are even in the process of being subdivided, and that’s my worst fear: the proliferation of gentleman farms,” said Dela Cruz (D, Wahiawa-Whitmore-Mililani Mauka).

The purchase is also backed by Sens. Laura Thielen (D, Hawaii Kai-Waimanalo-Kailua) and Gil Riviere (D, Heeia-Laie-Waialua), and Dela Cruz announced earlier this week that lawmakers were able to get an appropriation to buy the lands included in the Senate’s version of the state budget.

Lawmakers in the House and Senate will be negotiating over the details of that budget in the weeks ahead before deciding on a final version, and the proposed Dole land purchase will likely be a major issue in that bargaining.

The lands the senators hope to purchase are on both sides of Kamehameha Highway between Poamoho Village and Waialua, and are mostly owned by Dole with a few parcels owned by Castle & Cooke Hawaii, Dela Cruz said. All of the land is already on the market, he said.

According to Dole financial reports, the company began marketing for sale about 14,000 acres that it doesn’t farm on Oahu in 2011. A year later that figure grew to about 20,000 acres, and the company said it was aiming to receive \$175 million to \$200 million for the properties.

Currently Dole has about 18,000 acres for sale, although some of that land is already under contract with sales expected to close shortly.

The state Agribusiness Development Corp. this year prepared a report on the properties that concluded the Dole land sale offers a “unique opportunity” for the state to meet its obligations under the state Constitution to protect agricultural lands, promote diversified agriculture and increase the state’s self-sufficiency.

Scott Enright, chairman of the state Department of Agriculture, said his department has been advocating that the state begin buying up additional ag lands for several years, and has reorganized its land management operations in a way that positioned the department to manage more property.

The Agriculture Department now manages more than 13,000 acres, and the state Agribusiness Development Corp. manages another 20,000 acres, according to state ag officials.

Lawmakers last year provided \$500,000 to the ADC to investigate a possible purchase of Dole lands, and the agency identified parcels totaling 8,003 acres that are “of high

interest to the state" for farming because of their location and the availability of water and other infrastructure. Of those lands, 4,454 acres are farmable, according to the ADC report.

Dole's asking price for those lands is \$132 million, according to the report, and Dela Cruz said the Senate proposal to float bonds to borrow \$107 million to buy the land is based on that ADC study.

Enright said the Department of Agriculture supports the purchase "so long as it doesn't disrupt the financial priorities of the administration."

As the state seeks to promote new farming operations, "we're hard-pressed to see how the farmers are going to be able to buy the land and often find land with long-term leases, so the state having additional inventory can support food sustainability and the growth of agriculture," Enright said. "We've supported that effort all along, and continue to support it with the work of Sen. Dela Cruz."

If money for the land purchase is included in the final version of next year's state budget, lawmakers will then have to convince Gov. David Ige to release the funding. If that happens, the state and the landowner would each do appraisals and negotiate a final price based on those appraisals, Dela Cruz said.

Enright said he has discussed the need for more state-owned agricultural land with Ige but has not specifically discussed the Dole purchase with the governor and therefore can't say for certain whether Ige would release the money.

Dela Cruz has hatched a number of other plans in recent years in an effort to get the state to acquire Dole lands in the Central Oahu or North Shore areas. He proposed using revenue bonds to buy Dole property in Wahiawa in 2013 and proposed to swap the Oahu Community Correctional Center site in Kalihi for Dole properties last year.

Dela Cruz said the sale now under consideration is important to reduce the state's dependence on imported food, increase the number of jobs in agriculture and "make agriculture a living-wage profession."

"The population is on Oahu, and so we need a substantial amount of agricultural land so that we can ensure that we can feed our own population," he said. Even branches of state government such as the prison system, the schools and the university system import their food, he said.

"Until we reach scale of agricultural products, there's no way the state can even buy local," he said.

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