HOUSE RESOLUTION


WHEREAS, the Department of Agriculture's Plant Industry Division Plant Quarantine Branch prevents the introduction and spread of harmful pests and diseases into the State, certifies plants for export out of the State, and is also the State's primary resource for information on importing plants, insects, microorganisms, and non-domestic animals to Hawaii; and

WHEREAS, the Department of Agriculture’s Plant Quarantine Program began more than one hundred years ago when, in 1888, King David Kalakaua decreed that in order to protect the coffee industry in Hawaii, new coffee plants would not be allowed into the islands, and two years later, laws were enacted to prevent the introduction of injurious insect pests and plant diseases; and

WHEREAS, the Plant Quarantine Branch is the State's first line of defense in keeping pests out of the islands by monitoring whether eggs of harmful insects hatch on imported plants or if diseases that could jeopardize the health of other plants, which may appear only after significant growth of plants imported into the State; and

WHEREAS, the quarantine process differs based on the plant being imported and procedurally, coffee germplasm and coffee plants are required to go through a one-year quarantine process to ensure that the significant and crucial coffee industry of Hawaii is protected; and
WHEREAS, the State's process for acquiring an exemption from the plant quarantine rules is a rigorous process, which is overseen by numerous experts in multiple scientific fields, and requires approval by the Board of Agriculture and the Governor; and

WHEREAS, from 2016 to 2017, according to the United States Department of Agriculture, Hawaii produced more than 36,000,000 pounds of coffee cherry, nearly 2,000,000 pounds more than in the previous year; and

WHEREAS, according to the United States Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Association, the value of Hawaii's coffee crop stands at more than $62,000,000, with coffee cherry selling at $1.71 per pound; and

WHEREAS, Kona coffee is world renowned for its excellence and it is one of Hawaii's most iconic commercial exports; and

WHEREAS, the average Kona coffee farm is less than five acres in size and approximately 5,000,000 trees currently comprise the entire Kona coffee industry; and

WHEREAS, Kona Hills, LLC is financed by the Atlanta-based investment company Domain Capital Advisors; and

WHEREAS, Kona Hills, LLC is seeking to establish an almost 1,900-acre coffee farm in Kealakekua on which to plant 2,000,000 trees, which would be the largest coffee farm in the Kona region of Hawaii Island; and

WHEREAS, Kona Hills, LLC plans to grow at least six varieties of coffee, five of which are not currently farmed in the Kona coffee district and would produce different flavor profiles from the heritage Kona coffee profile which has been developed by generations of Kona farmers; and

WHEREAS, Kona Hills, LLC had requested an exemption to the Department of Agriculture's mandatory one-year quarantine period to import 1,500,000 in-vitro coffee embryos from Costa Rica; and
WHEREAS, coffee rust is a prevalent agricultural disease found on Costa Rican coffee farms; and

WHEREAS, an outbreak of coffee rust could cripple the Kona coffee industry; and

WHEREAS, the original import plan and quarantine exemption sought by Kona Hills, LLC could endanger the crop yields and financial security of local Kona coffee farmers, but on March 21, 2018, representatives of Kona Hills, LLC indicated at a public committee hearing of the House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture that the company was no longer requesting an exemption from the one-year quarantine period; and

WHEREAS, the Department of Agriculture in its written testimony failed to mention that Kona Hills, LLC's request for exemption had been withdrawn; and

WHEREAS, at least two issues are raised by examining the testimony and the discussion about the need for a quarantine of coffee plants in any form being brought into Hawaii from another state or another country; and

WHEREAS, the Department of Agriculture is viewed as the entity protecting the trademark of coffee produced and sold as Kona Coffee; and

WHEREAS, the definition of what constitutes "Kona Coffee" has been raised by the existing use and proposed use of coffee varieties other than the traditional coffee plants known as Kona Typica which is allegedly a varietal originating in Guatemala; and

WHEREAS, Coffea arabica has been molecularly characterized as a tetraploid species containing four sets of eleven chromosomes and is reportedly the only species of the genus Coffea to have forty-four chromosomes; and

WHEREAS, the coffee industry is severely threatened by the worldwide spread of a fungus Hemilia vastatrix, commonly referred to as coffee rust; and
WHEREAS, to date the Hawaiian coffee industry has been free of coffee rust; and

WHEREAS, it is anticipated that it is likely that coffee rust will be present in the Hawaiian archipelago in the not too distant future; and

WHEREAS, attempts have been made to selectively breed strains of different Coffea arabica varietals to be resistant to Hemilia vastatrix; and

WHEREAS, testimony at the March 21, 2018, hearing of the Committee on Agriculture indicated that varietals at least partially resistant to coffee rust are among the varietals proposed to be imported to Hawaii by Kona Hills, LLC; and

WHEREAS, it is not yet known how the flavor profiles of coffee rust-resistant varietals might differ from Kona Typica coffee; and

WHEREAS, new tools of genetic manipulation commonly grouped under the term CRISPR, are viewed as a remarkable breakthrough tool for genetic manipulation of the plant and animal genomes; and

WHEREAS, the precision of the CRISPR system could enable precise insertion of genetic elements conferring resistance to coffee rust into coffee plants while preserving the genetic elements which confer a specific flavor profile; and

WHEREAS, there is strong resistance to utilizing such a system on coffee plants in Hawaii because the coffee would be viewed as a genetically modified organism; and

WHEREAS, these many elements of the coffee industry bear further urgent discussion; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the House of Representatives of the Twenty-ninth Legislature of the State of Hawaii, Regular Session of 2018, that the University of Hawaii System and the Department of Agriculture are requested to convene a study group in conjunction with representatives of the coffee industry from all
the islands of the State where coffee is grown, to delineate and
discuss the various challenges to the Hawaii coffee industry,
and to propose a symposium for further intense discussion of
those issues in the summer of 2019; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that a proposal for such a
symposium, including funding mechanisms and any requests for
funding, be presented by the University of Hawaii and Department
of Agriculture before December 1, 2018, to the Legislature for
the 2019 Regular Session; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Department of Agriculture
is urged to reject any proposals for exemptions to its
quarantine rules regarding coffee until the proposed symposium
has convened and a report issued of the findings; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that certified copies of this
Resolution be transmitted to the Governor, President of the
University of Hawaii, Chairperson of the Board of Agriculture,
the manager of the Department of Agriculture's Plant Quarantine
Branch, all members of the Department of Agriculture Plant
Quarantine Branch Advisory Committee on Plants and Animals.