

The money tree

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For the second year in a row, proponents and opponents of genetically modified crops have fought their way to no action in the Hawaii State Legislature. Last year, a bill to ban genetically modified taro and coffee died after GMO proponents attached a “preemptive” rider to it that would have forbade all branches of the state and county government from regulating GM crops other than coffee and taro in any way. This year, that bill was essentially resurrected as two separate bills. House Bill 1663, in its original form, would have banned genetic modification of Hawaiian taro and restricted GM forms of other taros to greenhouses. That bill sailed through the House, but was amended in the Senate to delete the restrictions on non-Hawaiian GM taro. It died in the House of any other GM crop was revived as House Bill 1226. That bill sailed through the House, but died in committee in the Senate.

Both bills generated anti-GMO pressure from the environmentalists, organic farmers and Native Hawaiians and pro-GMO pressure mainly from the University of Hawaii and agribusiness companies and organizations.

There may have been some pressure generated from another source. During the last election, at least 18 candidates for the legislature—all incumbents—received campaign contributions from companies that had major investments in GM crops.

Among the biggest beneficiaries of those companies was Rep. Clift Tsuji, who chairs the Agriculture Committee that first heard, and passed, HB 1226. Tsuji got \$2,000 from E. I. Dupont De Nemours & Company, \$1,000 from Monsanto, \$300 from Dow Agrosciences, and \$250 from Syngenta Crop Protection. Other beneficiaries included Sen. Rosalyn Baker, who raked in \$3,300 from four companies; Rep. Michael Magaoay, who picked up \$1,750; and Rep. Kyle Yamashita, who pulled in \$1,450. Reps. Sharon Har, Roland Sagum and Joey Manahan pulled in \$1000 apiece; so did Senate Vice President Russell Kokubun. House Speaker Calvin Say got \$750 from Monsanto, and Senate President Colleen Hanabusa got \$500 from Dupont.

Agrobusiness giant Monsanto was the most generous of the donating companies, distributing \$6,250 among eight candidates. Dupont and its Pioneer subsidiary, which also grow genetically modified seed corn in the islands, gave out a total of \$5,570 to nine candidates. Swiss-based Syngenta, which also grows GM seed, along with Zeneca, Dow Agrosciences and Glaxo Smith-Cline all gave money.

GM money also flows into the legislative process by less direct routes. Monsanto employs six registered lobbyists at the capitol who have donated to the campaigns of nearly every legislator in Hawaii. Glaxo Smith-Cline also uses Radcliffe. Syngenta uses two lobbyists.

Opponents worry about food safety and unforeseen consequences such as allergic reactions. They can point to no certified deaths from GM crops—but to plenty of accidents. In 2005, for instance, Syngenta was fined for releasing 700 tons of illegal seeds into the U.S. market. And farmers on the island of Hawaii have discovered GM papaya genes that “drifted,” via cross-pollination, to trees that they had thought were organic.

So how effective were the companies’ donations in pushing their agenda?

All of the candidates with GM corporate money won re-election. Of the legislators who got industry money, only one—Rep. Maile Shimabukuro—voted against the companies’ interests on the two measures. But the companies also got help from people who got no money from them—such as Senator Jill Tokuda, who introduced the amendment to remove non-Hawaiian taro from Bill 1663; and Republicans Sam Slom and Fred Hemmings, the only senators to vote against the amended bill. And once again, the Legislature has failed to pass the industry-authored bill forbidding the regulation of GM crops by the state or counties, despite support by powerful representatives such as Say and Tsuji. Next election, the companies may spend a little more money on the Senate.