HAWAI'I FOOD+ POLICY
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Food+ Policy: Policy Focus Areas (2026)

Vision:

A Hawai‘i where communities are nourished by resilient, equitable, and ‘āina-centered food systems led by informed and empowered people of those places.

Mission Statement:

To develop the next generation of food system leaders by providing hands-on policy education, mentorship, and opportunities to engage in community-centered, ‘āina-rooted food system work.

Core Commitment: Civic Engagement and Youth Leadership

Civic engagement and governance literacy are central to Food+. We build pathways for Hawai‘i’s students and communities to understand the legislative process, participate in shaping public policy, and strengthen food systems through informed and empowered action. This commitment is woven through every pillar and intention that follows[1].

PILLAR 1: Local Agriculture, Farmers, and Food Production

Strengthen Hawai‘i’s capacity to feed itself by supporting local farmers, expanding opportunities for young and emerging farmers, and reducing reliance on imported foods.

Issue areas we follow

Entryways to the agricultural sector

Why this matters now:

Hawai‘i’s farmer workforce is aging, with the average age of farmers nearing 61 years old, with only 6% younger than 35 years old[2]. Younger generations and youth face steep barriers to entering agriculture, including land costs, financing challenges, and lack of workforce development for the agricultural sector. Not only is agricultural land diminishing and becoming increasingly costly, but it is also difficult for beginning farmers to navigate how to best secure land that is available for farming. Additionally, many farmers are also faced with the immense physical and mental pressures of needing multiple income streams to support themselves and their ‘ohana. Out of nearly 12,000

[1] Afterschool Alliance. (n.d.). *Issue brief: Civic engagement.* https://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/issue_briefs/issue_civic_engagement_73.pdf
[2] United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service. (2024, February). 2022 Census of Agriculture: Hawaii State and County Data. Nass.usda.gov. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/hawaii/hiv1.pdf

agricultural producers statewide, almost 50% rely on a primary occupation other than farming to make ends meet. It is likely we will continue to see younger generations drift away from working long and physically demanding hours for a comparatively smaller paycheck, and instead move toward careers with more comfortable work environments coupled with a reliable income. With federal workforce and agricultural training programs facing cuts, it is increasingly important to support state and community-led pathways for new farmers. Without adequate mentorship, local food production weakens as well as the transmission of invaluable agricultural knowledge. Strengthening youth entry into farming contributes to long-term food security and ʻāina stewardship.

Who is most impacted:

Young adults hoping to enter agriculture, Native Hawaiian farmers, small-scale producers, and individuals facing barriers to land and capital access.

Local food production and value-added infrastructure

Why this matters now:

Hawaiʻi imports the majority of its food, which creates vulnerability to supply chain disruptions and political instability[3]. With recent federal cuts to safety-net programs, natural disasters,and global pandemics highlighting the fragility of Hawaiʻi's food system. Local production serves as a mechanism to strengthen local supply chain and economic growth[4]. The 2022 Census of Agriculture revealed the continuation of Hawaiʻi's agricultural decline, with a 10.4% reduction in the number of farms between 2017 to 2022, along with the loss of over 300 producers and 82,000 acres of farmland in that same 5-year period[1]. This concerning trend indicates a pressing need for investments in infrastructure[5] that strengthens Hawaiʻi local food supply chain and economy. Investing in value-added processing and regional food[6] hubs increases opportunity for economic mobility for our farmers, supports small producers, and strengthens Hawaiʻi's ability to feed itself.

Who is most impacted:

Farmers, food producers, and households who experience higher food prices or disruptions when imports slow.

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[3] Department of Business, Economic Development & Tourism (DBEDT). (n.d.). *Increased food security and food self-sufficiency strategy.* https://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/op/spb/INCREASED_FOOD_SECURITY_AND_FOOD_SELF_SUFFICIENCY_STRATEGY.pdf

[4] Dumont, A. (2021, December 9). The economic impact of locally produced food. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. https://www.stlouisfed.org/on-the-economy/2017/december/economic-impact-locally-produced-food

[5] Hawaiʻi Department of Agriculture. (n.d.). *Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure (RFSI) Program.* https://dab.hawaii.gov/add/main/rfsi/

[6] County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (n.d.). *Food hubs.* https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/strategies-and-solutions/what-works-for-health/strategies/food-hubs

Food affordability and incentive models

Why this matters now:

Food subsidies provide monetary support to low-income households by reducing cost to groceries[7]. In Hawai‘i, programs like DA BUX help families stretch their food budgets while supporting Hawai‘i-grown agriculture. As federal cuts[8] reduce food subsidies such as SNAP, thereby reducing access and shrinking household purchasing power, local food subsidies programs play a larger role in nutrition security. Monitoring new incentive concepts, including kūpuna-focused models, food prescription programs as defined as , elimination of GET Taxes on food helps us understand how affordability can improve statewide food outcomes.

Who is most impacted:

SNAP households, kūpuna, low-income families, and communities with limited access to fresh foods.

PILLAR 2: Regenerative, Indigenous, and Climate-Resilient Food Systems

Restore ecosystems, uplift indigenous knowledge, and build long-term resilience in the face of climate change.

Issue areas we follow

Regenerative and Native Hawai‘ian farming and fishing practices

Why this matters now:

Food sovereignty serves as the right for people's access to healthy and cultural foods[9]. Native Hawaiians robust food systems (Ahupua’a) provided resources for food, including fish, salt, vegetables, fruit, and other plants[10]. Unfortunately, western colonization has greatly impacted Hawai‘i food systems which has displaced Native Hawaiians’ access to culturally relevant food and ecological practices. Not only were indigenous Hawaiians

[7] Edwards, C. (2016, May). *Food Subsidies.* Cato.org. https://www.cato.org/downsizing-government-essay/food-subsidies

[8] Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF). (n.d.). *The implications of federal SNAP spending cuts on individuals with Medicaid and other health coverage.* https://www.kff.org/medicaid/the-implications-of-federal-snap-spending-cuts-on-individuals-with-medicaid-and-other-health-coverage/

[9] Jernigan, V. B. B., Demientieff, L. X., & Maunakea, A. K. (2023). Food Sovereignty as a Path to Health Equity for Indigenous Communities: Introduction to the Focus Issue. Health promotion practice, 24(6), 1066–1069. https://doi.org/10.1177/15248399231190355

[10] Chung-Do, J. J., Hwang, P. W., Ho-Lastimosa, I., Rogerson, I., Ho, K., Jr, DeMello, K., Kauahikaua, D., & Ahn, H. J. (2024). MALAMA: Cultivating Food Sovereignty through Backyard Aquaponics with Native Hawaiian Families. Genealogy, 8(3), 101. https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy8030101

once able to survive off of traditional crops like ʻulu, niu, and kalo, but the abundance of food production would be enough to sustain Hawaiʻi's people in the present day. Modern Hawaiʻi food systems produce approximately 151,700 tons per year, which is only a fraction of the food produced during pre-colonial times and not nearly enough to ensure food security and sovereignty for the pae ʻāina[11]. Also, forced assimilation policies limited the passing down of oral histories and moʻolelo, thus also limiting the transfer of indigenous agricultural knowledge from one generation to the next.

With the rise of climate change, invasive species, and land degradation intensifying plays an important role in protecting our environment and preserving communities' food sovereignty. Federal environmental protections have weakened, shifting more responsibility to states. Indigenous and regenerative practices restore ecosystems[12], heal soil, revive watersheds, and build resilience without contributing to further ecological harm. Combining indigenous knowledge with modern technology is an impactful way for revitalizing Hawaiʻi's agricultural systems and landscapes.

Who is most impacted:

Native Hawaiian farmers and fishers, small producers, and communities that depend on healthy soil and water systems for local food.

Environmental and agricultural sustainability

Why this matters now:

Traditionally, Hawaiʻi's food system was characterized by land stewardship, abundant local food cultivation, and reinvesting in the soil and water which helps feed communities. Due to factors like urbanization, changes to land and water access, economic conditions, and invasive species, our agricultural footprint has since evolved to being import-dependent and resource-intensive[13]. Hawaiʻi's natural resources are limited, and unsustainable land use[14] threatens long-term agricultural viability. State-level action is critical as federal support declines. Policies that protect water, soil, and biodiversity create stronger foundations for local food production and reduce economic leakage. Advocating for policies that encourage sustainable agricultural systems is a vital step for promoting food and land sovereignty in Hawaiʻi for generations to come.

[11] Kurashima, N., Fortini, L. & Ticktin, T. (2019). The potential of indigenous agricultural food production under climate change in Hawaiʻi. *Nature Sustainability* 2, 191–199. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-019-0226-1
[12] Kurashima, N., et al. (n.d.). *Community-based watershed restoration in Heʻeia.* https://online.ucpress.edu/cse/article-abstract/1/1/1/34506/Community-Based-Watershed-Restoration-in-He-eia-He
[13] Aloha+ Challenge. (n.d.). Local Food Production and Consumption: 02 Labor and Land Resources. Alohachallenge.hawaii.gov. https://alohachallenge.hawaii.gov/pages/lfp-02-labor-land-resources
[14] Hawaiʻi Business Magazine. (n.d.). *Outdated classifications still guide the use of Hawaiʻi's ag lands.* https://www.hawaiibusiness.com/outdated-classifications-still-guide-the-use-of-hawaiis-ag-lands/

Hawai‘i’s food system is facing threats like severe drought and extreme weather events, invasive species, soil degradation, pests and disease, and the dominance of industrial agriculture. Additionally, we’ve seen land use changes contribute to invasive grasses colonizing the pae ‘āina and growing across nearly 25% of Hawaii’s surface area[15]. Policies that support a transition back to sustainable agriculture and address threats from invasive species and climate change are necessary for the sake of Hawai‘i’s economy, ecosystems, and communities. It is our kuleana to invest in efforts that protect our resources mauka to makai, and protect future generations from environmental and climate-related suffering.

Who is most impacted:

Communities near conventional agriculture, farmers adapting to climate stress, and people who rely on clean water and healthy soil for food production.

Disaster-related food system planning

Why this matters now:

Both local and global-scale disruptions have proven the fragility of Hawai‘i’s food system. Local events like volcanic eruptions, flooding, and wildfires make it challenging for residents to physically obtain food. Global-scale events– like the COVID-19 pandemic– cause physical obstacles, but also long-term economic disruptions like unemployment that make it more difficult for people to afford food. If an extreme weather event, such as a tropical cyclone, were to shut down Hawai‘i’s main productive port– Honolulu Harbor, which is responsible for intaking 80 to 90% of food consumed in Hawai‘i– the result would be catastrophic, with merely 5 to 7 days worth of commercial food available[16]. These types of events are ongoing threats to Hawai‘i’s vulnerable island food system, calling for State disaster preparedness strategies to be updated. Federal emergency response systems are stretched thin, making local preparedness essential. Tracking state and county efforts around emergency food distribution and disaster resilience helps communities stay safe during crises.

We are already seeing federal support weaken as nearly $500,000 worth of USDA-donated food has been cut from The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) in Federal Fiscal Year 2025 without warning[17]. TEFAP is a program within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that helps provide emergency food and nutrition assistance to low-income individuals or families at no cost. This program also

[15] Trauernicht, C., Pickett, E., Giardina, C. P., Litton, C. M., Cordell, S., & Beavers, A. (2015). The Contemporary Scale and Context of Wildfire in Hawai‘i. *Pacific Science*, *69*(4), 427–444. https://doi.org/10.2984/69.4.1
[16] McGregor, L.W. (2020). How Food Secure Are We If Natural Disaster Strikes? Sea Grant. https://seagrant.soest.hawaii.edu/how-food-secure-are-we-if-natural-disaster-strikes/
[17] State of Hawaii, Office of Community Services. (2025, April). The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Labor.hawaii.gov. https://labor.hawaii.gov/ocs/service-programs-index/federal-food-assistance-programs/tefap/

helps support farmers in challenging times by helping to move food from farm to food bank. As federal support becomes increasingly uncertain, State emergency preparedness strategies need to prioritize local procurement to ensure that our communities are fed, while simultaneously supporting farmers who lose market connections during disasters.

Who is impacted:

Households in disaster-prone places, families with limited financial buffers, and people who depend on consistent access to food during emergencies.

PILLAR 3: Food Access, Health, and Cultural Nourishment

Support community access to healthy, affordable, and culturally meaningful food.

Issue areas we follow

Nutrition security and culturally relevant food access

Why this matters now:

Federal cuts to social safety nets such as SNAP increases the risk of food insecurity for higher risk populations impacted by socio-economic disparities. Culturally grounded foods support health, identity, and community resilience. The transition to an import-dominant food system, combined with the rise of processed foods that replaced traditional foods, forced a disconnect from cultural practices. A critical step toward improving culturally-appropriate nutrition security and the health of our communities is to reclaim traditional practices and prioritize local production[18]. Increasing food and nutrition security reduces long-term health disparities and improves family stability.

Who is most impacted:

Native Hawai‘ian families, immigrant communities, LGBTQ+ households, students, and low-income families facing high food costs.

Strengthening nutrition assistance systems

Why this matters now:

Food assistance programs are a crucial component for decreasing the number of food insecure households by providing a lifeline for local families. Helping to lower grocery

[18] State of Hawai‘i, Department of Health. (2018, March). Good Food for All: Advancing Health Equity Through Hawai‘i's Food System. Health.hawaii.gov. https://health.hawaii.gov/physical-activity-nutrition/files/2021/08/gffa-web.pdf

bills aids the ability of individuals to feed themselves and their ‘ohana high-quality and nutritious foods. With uncertainty around federal nutrition programs, Hawai‘i must understand gaps, risks, and opportunities. The economic disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted Hawai‘i’s food insecure individuals and families, which resulted in a 55% increase in households receiving SNAP benefits (as of 2023)[19]. Monitoring SNAP access, school meals, and federal incentives helps ensure communities continue to receive support as national systems shift. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, over 13,000 Hawai‘i residents may lose all or some of their SNAP each month once restrictions are enforced[20].

Cuts to SNAP will not only harm families, but also Hawai‘i’s economy by resulting in an annual $1.3 billion loss[21]. SNAP participants as a consumer group stimulate local economies by financially supporting local food producers and retailers. In 2025, SNAP sales brought in approximately $730 million for Hawai‘i[22]. In underserved communities, smaller grocery retailers may take a hit because these markets are heavily reliant on food sales paid in SNAP dollars[23]. Increasing cuts and regulations to SNAP will reduce the number of individuals who can spend their money at these stores, thus also weakening grocers’ purchasing power from local farmers, as well as compromising nutrition security for those who lose benefits.

Who is most impacted:

SNAP households, students who rely on school meals, young families, and kupuna.

PILLAR 4: Farm to School, Education, and Youth Food Pathways

Increase food literacy and strengthen the connection between learners and Hawai‘i-grown foods.

[19] State of Hawai‘i, Department of Health. (n.d.). Physical Activity and Nutrition Program: SNAP-Ed. Health.hawaii.gov. https://health.hawaii.gov/physical-activity-nutrition/home/snap-ed/
[20] Budiono, V. (2025, September 6). Four Hawai‘i nonprofits receive investments as SNAP cuts loom. Hawai‘i Appleseed. https://hiappleseed.org/in-the-news/four-hawaii-nonprofits-receive-investments-as-snap-cuts-loom
[21] Boyes, J., Shaw, A. (2025, September). Federal Funding Cuts Impacting Hawai‘i’s Food System: Part 2, More Than Just Money at Stake. Agriculture Stewardship Hawai‘i. https://agstewardshiphawaii.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Federal-Funding-Report-Update-Sept.pdf
[22] National Education Association. (2025, October). School Nutrition, SNAP, and Local Food Funding in Hawai‘i. https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2025-10/33488-state-specific-nutrition-funding-fact-sheet_hawaii_final.pdf
[23] Roeder, A. (2025, November). SNAP lifts families out of poverty, bolsters local economies, expert says. Harvard School of Public Health. https://hsph.harvard.edu/news/snap-lifts-families-out-of-poverty-bolsters-local-economies-expert-says/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThere%20is%20strong%20evidence%20that,Food%2C%20Nutrition%20and%20Consumer%20Services

Issue areas we follow

Farm to school initiatives and local procurement

Why this matters now:

In Hawai‘i, 5 keiki in an average classroom size of 15 go to bed hungry every night[24]. School meals are a lifeline for many students, especially as families face higher costs and reduced federal support. The meals provided at school may be the only balanced meals a child consumes each a day, so play a key role in child nutrition. Farm to school programs not only improve nutrition outcomes, but also help reduce food waste and support local agriculture. Tracking these initiatives helps us support students in understanding how local procurement shapes community health. Hawai‘i has set a statewide goal for 30% of food served in public school meals to be locally sourced by 2030, including fresh produce, food raised and harvested in Hawai‘i, and value-added products[25]. It is estimated that if the HIDOE achieves its 30% goal, it could create an annual demand of $15 to $20-million in local food purchases for Hawai‘i farmers[26].

Farm to school initiatives are important because institutions have tremendous buying power, especially the Hawai‘i Department of Education (HIDOE) who is one of the State’s largest food buyers[27]. Local procurement is a vital link between Hawai‘i’s food system and public schools as it helps supply nutritious, fresh, and culturally-relevant meals for students while simultaneously acting as a reliable market for local food producers. It is crucial for the State to implement initiatives that strengthen local procurement by having the HIDOE hui up with local farmers. Building these relationships, investing in key infrastructure, and strategically re-designing menus to be local and culturally-centered will improve food security for school-aged children. Since 2013, nearly $1.3 million in funding from farm to school grants has been used to purchase local food and produce for schools[21]. Funding from federal sources is decreasing, and therefore so is the opportunity to expand programs that support healthy keiki and local food economies.

Who is most impacted:

Students who rely on school meals, educators, school food service staff, and local farmers who participate in school procurement.

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[24] Spoto, D. (2022, May). Feed Our Keiki; Support Our Schools; Help Our Farmers. Hawai‘i Appleseed. https://hiappleseed.org/publications/feed-our-keiki

[25] Hawai‘i State Department of Education. (2025). Farm to School. Hawai‘i Public Schools. https://hawaiipublicschools.org/school-services/school-food-services/farm-to-school/

[26] Ulupono Initiative. (2023, January). Hawai‘i DOE reports 6.2% of student meals sourced locally. https://ulupono.com/newsletter-listing/january-2023-eupdate/hawaii-doe-reports-6-2-of-student-meals-sourced-locally/

[27] State of Hawai‘i, Department of Business, Economic Development, and Tourism (DBEDT). (2025, October). Hawai‘i Agribusiness Development Corporation Holds First-Ever Board Meeting on Maui. dbedt.hawaii.gov. https://dbedt.hawaii.gov/blog/25-41/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CThe%20HIDOE%20serves%20more%20than,will%20help%20bridge%20that%20gap.%E2%80%9D

ʻĀina-based and indigenous food education

Why this matters now:

Political pressures[28] on education across the country threaten place-based and cultural learning[29]. The intention of ʻāina-based education is to foster opportunities to form place-based relationships between land, community, and resources that are deeply rooted in reciprocity and sustainability[30]. Learning through ʻāina, especially by growing food, helps perpetuate ancestral practices like resource stewardship and food sharing. Using education to reconnect people with the land creates opportunities to bridge indigenous wisdom with modern knowledge and tools to seek out the most well-informed solutions to food sustainability. Additionally, connecting people to food through ʻāina-based education is a powerful way to demonstrate the overlap between local or self-grown food, health, and well-being. Not only does it connect people to food, but also brings together community by nurturing a sense of belonging. Community and indigenous food education strengthens identity, mental health, and pathways to food system careers while supporting cultural continuity.

Who is most impacted:
Keiki, young adults, Native Hawaiian communities, and students seeking cultural or place-based learning

Cross-cutting areas to monitor and support

Food+ monitors broader system-level issues that influence all pillars but are not designated as core intentions.

Food system data, transparency, and public reporting

Clear and accessible food system data improves accountability and supports stronger policy analysis. This data includes food insecurity metrics, agricultural production data, procurement transparency, and legislative reporting. Many statewide agriculture datasets are outdated, and budget cuts at both the state and federal level have limited the availability of consistent up-to-date data.

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[28] Education Law Center. (n.d.). *How proposed FY26 budget cuts affect school districts.* https://edlawcenter.org/trump-2-0-how-will-proposed-fy26-budget-cuts-affect-your-school-district
[29] Kanaʻiaupuni, S., Ledward, B., & Jensen, U. (2010). *Culture-based education and its relationship to student outcomes.* https://www.ksbe.edu/assets/research/collection/10_0117_kanaiaupuni.pdf
[30] Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. (2025, January). ʻĀina-based Education, Place-based Education, and Project-based Learning. ies.ed.gov. https://ies.ed.gov/rel-pacific/2025/01/aina-based-education-place-based-education-and-project-based-learning-infographic

Technology and infrastructure for civic participation

Digital access, civic tech tools, and modernization of legislative systems influence how communities engage in policymaking. Leveraging technology as an important learning tool helps empower communities to participate in policy decisions. These approaches help connect people to civic engagement resources, improve access to information, and provide simplified and engaging opportunities for participation.

Revenue and fiscal policy affecting food programs

Budget and revenue decisions shape the long-term viability of agriculture, food access, and community programs. Cuts to federal funding are putting at least $175 million at risk for Hawai‘i’s food system– equal to 25% of Hawai‘i’s agricultural GDP– which will negatively impact many beneficial programs and resources that are reliant on federal sources[22]. The State must strategically compensate for the uncertainty in federal funding for Hawai‘i’s food system.

Food+ tracks these issues to better understand their impact across the food system.