

The Maui News

Kahoolawe commission seeks funding from state lawmakers

The Kaho'olawe Island Reserve Commission's fate is again in state lawmakers' hands while the state agency serving as caretaker and manager of the former U.S. Navy bombing range seeks funding for more personnel, restoration work and volunteer efforts.

In 2015, legislators appropriated \$1 million to the commission for fiscal years 2015 through 2016. Last session, another \$450,000 was added for the current fiscal year.

In the last several years, KIRC has seen its \$44 million trust fund dwindle to around \$523,000, according to Kelly McHugh, the commission's public information specialist.

"We no longer rely on these funds for any programs or operations costs, but we do utilize funds temporarily as we await grant reimbursements," she said, explaining that most grants present a *"buy-now-pay-later model."*

"That fund cannot and should not be decreased any further," she said.

Beginning today, hearings will be held on bills to help fund the commission.

"If we don't get any state funding, we will finish up whatever grant obligations we have and might have to close shop," said Executive Director Michael Naho'opi'i.

But he said he's hopeful that, with bills in the Legislature seeking funding for KIRC, something will pan out. The commission is asking its supporters to testify in person or online.

At 9 a.m. today at the state Capitol, the House Committee on Water & Land will hear House Bill 620. The measure seeks funding to add four positions to the current 15, bringing KIRC's total personnel to 19.

Commission Chairwoman Michele Chouteau McLean said that the addition to 19 total positions is the "*minimum*" that the agency needs "*to make progress on the island.*"

Commission employees coordinate volunteer groups that do restoration work on the island such as planting native Hawaiian plants, retaining top soil and re-creating a native ecosystem while monitoring birds and insects and removing invasive species, she said.

Other workers manage the island's marine ecosystem; conduct cultural and education programs; document, protect and preserve cultural and historic sites; maintain Kahoolawe base camp operations; handle boat and other logistics; conduct unexploded ordnance safety training; and do administrative work, McLean said.

The measure requests about \$1 million in operating funds, according to the bill and Naho'opi'i.

Naho'opi'i said that KIRC had around 19 staff members until recent years when it needed to make cuts.

Also, House Bill 100, the state budget omnibus bill, calls for funding the commission's current 15 staff members with about \$1 million, Naho'opi'i said.

"It's a good start," he said. *"It's moving us in the direction of having permanent staff."*

Even though their jobs are not guaranteed annually, staff members remain with the commission because they are dedicated to restoring the island, he said.

"People are here (because) they want to do it," he said.

Asked how he felt about appealing to lawmakers every year to keep the organization afloat, Naho'opi'i said he takes it in stride.

There always have been conversations about permanently funding the commission with state money, he said.

“It’s slowly moving in that direction,” he said. “It takes a couple of years. The Legislature gets used to funding us, see we can manage the money efficiently, not over spending.”

Meanwhile, KIRC’s boat has undergone major repairs in the past six months and has been returned for use by the commission, Naho’opi’i said. In the interim, the organization received help from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which offered the use of its boat for KIRC personnel to make trips between Maui and Kahoolawe.

Now, KIRC can push ahead with its restoration work on Kahoolawe. Activities include planting native grasses along the beach and restoring sand dunes, which will begin this weekend.

A Kaho’olawe mobile app was recently launched. It includes images and documents and videos. Although the app remains in its infancy and is only available through Apple’s iTunes, KIRC hopes to expand the app so it can be accessed by other mobile devices.

Naho’opi’i added that KIRC is in line to receive around \$500,000 for the design of its Kihei base site, where it hopes to establish its primary operations, as well as an information and cultural learning center.

KIRC launches its boat at the Kihei Boat Ramp, near its base site. The property includes a Kaho’olawe Educational Walking Trail, a traditional Hawaiian hale and a small nursery.

Naho’opi’i said that lawmakers passed a funding bill for the base project around two years ago, but an error in the bill caused a holdup. The bill said KIRC was in Hawaii, as in the state of Hawaii, but it should have said that KIRC is based on Maui.

A bill to correct the error is pending in the Legislature this session.

KIRC hopes to generate revenue from the site when it is completed, hopefully around 2023, he said.

Congress established the Kaho'olawe Rehabilitation Trust Fund in 1994 while authorizing \$400 million for ordnance removal. A report critical of the commission by the state Office of the Auditor predicted the fund would be depleted by fiscal 2018.

To raise money, the commission has sought public donations, grants and state funding.

The Legislature created the commission to manage the island reserve while it's held in trust for a future Native Hawaiian sovereign entity. The commission is administratively attached to the state Department of Land and Natural Resources.

* Melissa Tanji can be reached at mtanji@mauinews.com.

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