



RE: Expansion of National Forest to Hawaii

Dear Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands,

I am the CEO of Kupu, Hawaii's largest accredited youth corps. Over the last few decades we have worked with nearly 150 partner sites across the state including the US Forest Service to support conservation efforts with our young people (corps members). Through this time, we have found Hawaii's unique environment to be one of the most amazing ecological jewels in our world that needs protection and also provides a unique opportunity.

From a protection standpoint, Hawaii has more Federally listed endangered species than any other state. It is also one of the few states without a national forest. There has been an experimental forest managed by the US Forest Service, and what we have found is that it uniquely provides an amazing opportunity for collaboration and preservation. In fact, Kupu has partnered and placed so many young adults with the US Forest Service team that there is a location in the experimental forest named after Kupu. We love seeing how as we protect this area, it has allowed communities to come together and also it has become a vehicle to transform lives. We have seen a plethora of young adults who have come through our youth corps gain valuable skills because of the work they have done with the Forest Service and their very committed team.

Kupu has worked closely with the US Forest Service, Region V, and has developed exchange programs between native youth in Hawaii and California. These exchanges included visits to national forests in California. Kupu is in support of the Secretary of Agriculture to complete a study into developing a national forest in Hawaii. Having our own regional forest would allow further exchange of cultures and allow Hawaii's unique status as an island to further educate others from around the world how we can manage limited resources in order to preserve life. National Forests also provide a wide variety of functions such as silviculture, working lands, carbon offsets, and much more. Kupu also sees how partnership in forest management is transformative for those involved and provides young people with a vehicle to transform their lives and build community. Federal partnership by establishing a National Forest in Hawaii would allow a unique forest system that could be world renowned for both the important island forest management as well as how it critically impacts community.

Having a National Forest also provides opportunities for leveraged resources with programs like Kupu. Kupu is the largest recipient of AmeriCorps funding in Hawaii and also has supported legislation such as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conservation Service Corps (21 CSC) Act around corps related funding on public lands. The 21 CSC Act also allows young people who serve in programs like Kupu on public lands to be hired non-competitively. This is a huge opportunity to promote local talent that have proven themselves through service and allow local succession into Federal employment. Organizations like Kupu can also help to leverage Forest Service support to provide opportunities to engage community, create jobs, develop training systems to build out next generation leaders, and encourage collaboration. This work will not only improve watersheds and nearshore marine habitats, but it will also contribute to development of local talent and economy.

Thank you very much for your consideration of placing a National Forest in Hawaii and we highly support this initiative. We are very willing to support it and provide the partnership necessary to help the US Forest Service to be even more successful here in Hawaii.

Aloha,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Leong", with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

John Leong