

**Testimony of Davis Price
Regional Director for Hawai'i
NDN Collective**

**Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Oversight Hearing on Native Priorities for the 2023 Farm Bill Reauthorization
7/26/23**

Aloha mai kākou, my name is Davis Price and I am the Hawai'i Regional Director for NDN Collective. I am kānaka 'ōiwi (Native Hawaiian) and reside on the island of O'ahu. I would like to extend sincerest gratitude to Senator Schatz and Senator Murkowski for the opportunity to testify today and for the Committee's diligent effort to include the voices of Native peoples in this highly impactful legislation.

NDN Collective is a nationwide organization dedicated to empowering indigenous communities and nations to exercise our inherent right to self-determination while fostering a foundation of justice and equity for all people and mother earth. Since 2019, NDN has deployed philanthropic grants to over 700 indigenous led organizations and projects across the U.S. and its territories, from Puerto Rico to Guam. In Hawai'i, NDN has deployed over \$4 million dollars in grants to Native Hawaiian-led projects. One of the core functions of our work is to foster and develop economic systems that center the transformative value of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK.)

Today, I would like to highlight the groundbreaking TEK work that has been underway in Hawai'i for many years. This 'āina-based (land-based work) is happening across Hawai'i and is focused on restoring culturally significant spaces that once supported a thriving population and food system that was completely self-sufficient. Today, Hawai'i is grappling with the impacts of a rapidly changing natural environment and our traditional Hawaiian management practices are providing a guiding metric for what once existed and what is possible in the future.

Hawai'i is the most isolated land mass on earth. A small island chain in the center of the largest body of ocean on the planet that once supported an estimated population of 1 million people prior to western contact, with no imported goods. This is nearly the same size as the population today. However, today, Hawai'i imports approximately 90% of its food, which leaves our entire island population extremely vulnerable to disasters, whether they be natural or manmade. This statistic has become a mantra of sorts in the Hawaiian community as a movement for self-determination, cultural revitalization, and reconnection to ancestral land has gained momentum. We know the solution to our own food insecurity and greater collective sustainability is grounded in our ancestral knowledge systems.

For many years, most people overlooked the fact that Hawai'i has become increasingly more dependent on outside sources of sustenance, such as importing nearly all of our food, while our

land and water resources are utilized for other extractive economic purposes or neglected altogether. That was until the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent economic shutdowns actually gave everyone a taste of what happens when the ships actually stop coming. Empty store shelves, spikes in gas prices, and limited access to the bare necessities were wake up calls to many who probably hadn't paid much attention to how vulnerable we actually are in the middle of a vast ocean. Since that time, much more attention has been given to the work happening in the Native Hawaiian community to restore spaces that are not only culturally relevant to our community but are also a glimpse into the economic bedrocks of a once thriving ecosystem, our traditional food system. Our traditional food system is traditional ecological knowledge in Hawai'i, and it is recognizable to indigenous communities throughout the country and around the globe.

Indigenous ancestral knowledge systems most often highlight the capacity that humans have to enhance our environment, not only extract from it. In practice, this is recognition that our treatment of natural resources impacts our communities and the larger environment, and those impacts are considered as much as potential profits are when evaluating land use. This is the foundation of traditional ecological knowledge and it is imperative that we embrace the potential for a truly symbiotic relationship between our human societies and the environment. Developing these relationships better positions us to protect our resources and leave future generations with healthy environments that can continue to provide the resources they need for survival.

The conservation and research titles of the Farm Bill provide opportunities to codify the value of TEK and to ensure that we continue to enhance conservation standards and practices. This also requires the compilation of data that measures the positive impacts of TEK related work. There are many examples in Hawai'i of restoration projects that focus on restoring land and food system resources, and we can visibly see the positive impacts of these projects.

When traditional mahi 'ai kalo (wetland taro fields) are restored, the surrounding streams become healthier, native species return and habitats are reinvigorated. When traditional loko i'a (fishpond) spaces are restored, the shoreline reefs become healthier, the upland streams become healthier, and native species return. These are the magnificent outcomes when people are engaging the land to amplify the natural occurrences of mother nature and optimize the natural environment's capacity to produce food. True symbiosis.

I have been fortunate to be a part of a small working group that has been gathering input from 70 Native Hawaiian food producers regarding this year's Farm Bill. In addition to being food producers, these are cultural, environmental, and community stewards. This group represents a fraction of the work happening across Hawai'i to achieve self-determination and to develop solutions to some of the greatest challenges we collectively face in our island society. This work is also reflective of aligned work happening in Native communities throughout the country. TEK is recognition that our indigenous communities around the world hold foundational knowledge that can help us mitigate the existential threats we face with rapidly increasing natural disasters.

Inclusion of TEK into the conservation and research titles was one of many recommendations from Native Hawaiian producers and members of the Native Farm Bill Coalition. Attached is a report that summarizes the outreach effort to gather input from Native Hawaiian producers and in it are a handful of recommendations that we hope this committee can work to include in the 2023 reauthorization of the Farm Bill.

I am humbled to be just one voice amongst the many thousands of ancestors and relatives to carry forth the work of our lāhui Hawai'i (Hawaiian Nation), mahalo for your time and consideration.