

Gov. David Ige wants biocontrol center to tackle invasive species

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CRAIG T. KOJIMA /DEC. 3

Gov. David Ige emphasized the need for a biocontrol center during his keynote address in Kona on Monday for a workshop of the Western Governors' Biosecurity and Invasive Species Initiative.

Gov. David Ige hopes to build a \$35 million regional biocontrol center in Hawaii that will help combat invasive species, a problem that costs the state hundreds of millions of dollars annually and threatens the state's economy and natural environment.

Little fire ants alone are [expected to cost](#) the state more than \$200 million a year, and if the brown tree snake were to take hold in Hawaii, it could cost upward of \$2 billion annually in economic damage, according to estimates from the state Department of Agriculture.

Ige emphasized the need for a biocontrol center during his keynote address in Kona on Monday for a workshop of the Western Governors' Biosecurity and Invasive Species Initiative. Ige has chaired the Western Governors' Association since last year and has made invasive species his top priority.

The biocontrol center would research ways to control invasive pests not just for Hawaii, but for Western states and Pacific territories, said Ige, who is hoping that the regional scope will help attract federal support.

"We do know that we want to become a center for research and development in the management of invasive species in general," Ige told the Honolulu Star-Advertiser, adding that biocontrol is one area that appears particularly promising and where Hawaii has achieved successes.

For instance, a decade ago invasive gall wasps were destroying Hawaii's native wiliwili trees, and scientists worried that the trees would soon be wiped out. Scientists were able to safely introduce a Tanzanian wasp that's a predator of the gall wasp, and the trees soon began recovering.

Over the past century, [more than 200 alien species](#) have been purposely introduced to Hawaii to control pests, with mixed results. One of the more notorious examples is the mongoose, which was introduced by the sugar industry in the 1880s to control rats in sugar cane fields. The effort was [misguided](#) as the mongoose had only a minor effect on the rat population while causing serious harm to birds, insects and other animals.

The biocontrol center would be equipped with diagnostic labs and areas for testing plants and insects.

Ige said that biocontrol could provide an ideal alternative to the use of chemicals to control pests.

"Oftentimes it is difficult to spray and apply chemicals, especially where we have residents and the general population," said Ige. "We believe that biocontrol can be an effective strategy to manage invasive species, and that would be the preferred option if we can find biocontrols that do not create other unintended consequences that would be more detrimental than the invasive species themselves."

The biocontrol center is part of the Ige administration's overarching [biosecurity plan](#) to protect the state from invasive species which was [rolled out in 2016](#) and includes about 150 components. The 10-year plan is estimated to cost \$39 million annually. Ige said that not all of the items have been funded by the Legislature.

The Monday workshop on invasive species was the kickoff to the Western Governors' Association's winter meeting, which will include discussion on a wide range of issues, including renewable energy, health care, veterans' issues and outdoor recreation.