

Bill would incentivize conservation, reforestation of native trees

08 July 2020



As part of an effort to stimulate reforestation efforts on the Big Island, the County Council will consider a bill that would lower property taxes for owners of certain forest lands.

During a meeting Tuesday of the council's Finance Committee, council members were roundly in favor of a bill that would create additional classifications for "native forests" within the county code in order to incentivize the conservation and reforestation of native trees.

Environmental lawyer Leslie Cole-Brooks, who helped develop the bill, said it would have long-term benefits for conservation on the island as a whole.

During a presentation before the committee, Cole-Brooks explained the county code currently has an option for landowners to set aside at least 2.75 contiguous acres of forest land consisting of at least 60% native species and with 25% tree cover for preservation for 25 years. Land set aside in this way is subject to a special value assessment, which leads to a tax write-off for the landowner.

However, Cole-Brooks said the bill would amend the code to create two new categories of native forests.

"Functional forests" would consist of 60% native and non-invasive, non-native tree species, while "successional forests" would be new lava substrates with less than 10 centimeters of soil depth.

By creating new categories of native forests, Cole-Brooks said the bill incentivizes landowners to assist in the revitalization of native plant species.

By coincidence, the bill was discussed immediately after the committee approved a resolution for the county to acquire a South Kona property in order to preserve a native forest on that parcel.

"This is the rarest ecosystem on earth," said property owner Wade Lee. "It's a part of Hawaii even Hawaiians don't get to see."

Lee said he was worried development around the forest could lead to it being lost forever, whether through human impact or the introduction of invasive species.

“This is a great day for native forests,” Cole-Brooks commented.

The committee heaped praise on the bill, which Hilo Councilwoman Sue Lee Loy called a “fundamental, foundational piece of legislation.”

“Too often, we write policy with a lot of sticks,” Lee Loy said. “So it’s great to see a bill like this that has a lot of really great carrots.”

The committee voted unanimously to forward the bill to the full council.

Source: <https://www.hawaiitribune-herald.com/2020/07/08/hawaii-news/bill-would-incentivize-conservation-reforestation-of-native-trees/>