DEPARTMENT OF LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES

News Release

NEIL ABERCROMBIE
GOVERNOR

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CHAIRPERSON

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DLNR TAKES STEPS TO CONTROL NEW THREATS TO AGRICULTURE, NATURAL RESOURCES ON HAWAI'I ISLAND

Confirmed Sightings of Axis Deer Reported on Big Island

HONOLULU -- The Department of Land and Natural Resources' Division of Forestry and Wildlife (DOFAW) and a coalition of resource managers on Hawai‘i Island have confirmed recent sightings of an introduced, damaging large mammal -- axis deer – in areas of from Kohala, Ka‘u, Kona and Mauna Kea.

"We are now expanding our surveys of areas where deer have been reported, and are developing a response and removal plan," said William J. Aila, DLNR Chairperson. "We consider this a serious problem with far-reaching economic and environmental impacts to the agriculture industry and native ecosystems on the island," Aila said.

A joint effort is now underway between DLNR, the Department of Agriculture, Big Island Invasive Species Committee (BIISC), federal natural resource management agencies, ranchers, farmers, private landowners and concerned citizens. Strong, swift action is needed to protect this island from newly introduced damaging ungulates that threaten the environmental character of the Big Island.

The BIISC has heard from ranchers, land owners and concerned residents from several locations on Hawai‘i island that they are seeing unusual game animals. BIISC is working with trackers and using game cameras to survey and confirm locations of these animals across the island from Kohala, Ka‘u, Kona and Mauna Kea.

"We take all of these reports very seriously since there are a number of mammal species present on neighboring islands that could do serious damage to agricultural industry on this island," said Jan Schipper, BIISC program manager.

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“Ranchers and farmers have already expressed their concerns to me that deer and other species that are suspected to have been illicitly introduced on the Big Island would destroy their crops and possibly introduce new diseases to our island, as has happened on other islands,” he said.

Besides agriculture and public safety concerns, conservation agencies are particularly concerned about the impact to forest and native ecosystems and threatened and endangered species. There are no fences on Hawai‘i island that are tall enough to keep deer out. If deer become established, conservation and deer exclosure fences on the island will have to be raised to 8 feet. Retrofitting the more than 300 miles of fences could cost tens of millions of dollars. Farmers, ranchers and public safety officials would also need to install fences to protect crops and to reduce deer-vehicle collisions.

“DLNR’s mission is to preserve and protect our natural resources, paramount of which are our watersheds and native ecosystems. We will need to take quick and effective action to prevent costly and destructive impacts on the Big Island that will last for generations, perhaps forever,” said Aila.

Axis deer were first introduced to Moloka‘i and O‘ahu in 1868, Lana‘i in 1920, and Maui in 1959. They were never historically introduced to the island of Hawai‘i, and their confirmed presence on that island has grave implications for island farmers and ranchers, public health, watersheds, and native Hawaiian ecosystems and species.

DLNR asks the Big Island residents to report any sightings of deer or any other unusual new or introduced mammal anywhere to call the BIISC Hotline at (808) 961-3299 or email Jan Schipper at GJS@HAWAII.EDU. Please provide your name, contact information, an estimate of how many deer, and the location where you saw the deer. Anyone with information relating to the unauthorized introduction of these or any other restricted or prohibitive animals is urged to also contact BIISC.

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For more information news media may contact:
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AXIS DEER FACTS:

Axis deer were first introduced to Moloka‘i and O‘ahu in 1868, Lana‘i in 1920, and Maui in 1959.

They have caused extensive problems on Maui where more than 12,000 deer roam in upcountry. Deer tend to wander onto ranch, farmland and urban areas resulting in millions of dollars in damages.

Axis deer cause major losses to agriculture, native species, and Hawaii's ecosystem.

SIDEBAR: MAUI STRUGGLES WITH IMPACTS OF AXIS DEER

Axis deer have caused extensive problems for agriculture in Maui County. The Maui axis deer population has expanded over six fold over the past 10 years to over 12,000 animals today. Deer occur where they cannot be safely or easily hunted or controlled. Deer now move into more ranched, farmed and urban areas and shift from browsing to grazing in herds of hundreds of animals, resulting in millions of dollars in damages to farmers and other land owners across Maui and an increase risk of deer-vehicle collisions.

A diverse group representing government agencies, visitor industry, large and small ranchers and landowners has joined together to solve the issue and hope to implement effective actions soon.

"Maui County is very concerned with this problem. An Axis Deer Working Group which was formed as a partnership between Maui Invasive Species Committee and Maui County Farm Bureau was recently revitalized to evaluate what can be done," said Arakawa. "Based on our own experiences, we would urge Big Island authorities to act swiftly to eradicate this pest, which has the ability to multiply very quickly, and impact vast areas."

“Axis deer definitely compete with livestock for forage, particularly under drought conditions,” said J. Scott Meidell, Vice President and General Manager of Haleakala Ranch Company. “Last June we did some analysis and drew up a drought plan that suggested we had forage to carry us through November. It turns out that the forage tanked in July/August as the combination of drought and deer kicked in. The concentrated damage of deer under those conditions rendered our drought plan useless and caused us significant losses from supplemental feed, destocking, death and premature sales. Farmers in the Upcountry region were severely affected, as well. My earnest advice is, for the sake of agriculture and the environment, to do what it takes to avoid establishment of axis deer on the Big Isle,” he said.

Axis deer cause agricultural losses by eating forage, plant leaves, stems, fruits, seeds, flowers, and bark, and by trampling plants. They also debark trees, which frequently results in the death of sizeable trees.

"We lost 6 productive acres this year - the deer ate it all," said Paula J. Hegele, President of Tedeschi Vineyards, Ltd. "It is really difficult to put a dollar amount on it since our end product is value added, but we lost about 6 tons of grapes for production which would have amounted to wine revenue of approximately $150,000. We are going to put deer fencing around the entire 23 acres, which is a huge cost, but we will still lose a great deal of next year's production because of this year's damage to the canes and bud wood, bacteria from deer saliva, and broken trellis systems where the deer ripped down the vines," she said.

"As a farmer myself, I have had to deal with a herd of a hundred deer at a time in my fields,” said Maui Mayor Alan Arakawa. “We are well aware of the destructive impacts of the fast-growing axis deer population on our farms, ranches, watersheds, and even our golf courses. Many farmers cannot undertake the high cost of entirely fencing their property to keep out herds of deer, and may literally lose a crop overnight," he said.

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