

Understanding water issue has never been more important

THE CHAMBER VIEW

by Pamela Tumpap



We need water daily. But, unless it is threatened, how much thought do we

give to where our water comes from, how we are using this resource and what it provides? However, when there is a drought, water restrictions or loss of water, this resource quickly becomes top of mind, if not urgent. Well, a pressing matter is at hand with the state Commission on Water Resource Management setting Interim In-stream Flow Standards. We must make understanding the water situation a priority because the current path could be devastating.

Water continually should be in the forefront of community discussions because this resource is — plain and simple — essential to life. We cannot live without water, a resource that is becoming more precious, not just on Maui but worldwide. Therefore, we must elevate public knowl-

edge, engage more in discussion, adequately plan, find winning answers and know the impact of our recommendations before making determinations in haste, with little input but with serious negative ramifications.

Decisions about water should be made in the public's interest. We believe the decisions should be balanced and reflect the triple-bottom-line — economy, environment, social well-being — view of sustainability. The decisions should incorporate a broad view — examining all possible water sources and resolutions, including new source development — and take into account both current and future needs.

Too often, judgments about water have been made with little public knowledge about the impact on people's lives, with minor participation from residents and businesses, and few voices heard overall. This cannot continue — especially not with water, which impacts us all. It is time we further educate ourselves, get involved and speak up, which is exactly what happened this week.

As the state Commission on

Water Resource Management (CWRM) addressed the four streams known as Na Wai Eha in a contested case and held a public meeting Thursday to discuss an additional 19 East Maui streams, hundreds of residents and business people rallied Wednesday and Thursday to let commissioners know this community wants fair-and-balanced water decisions that put people first.

Participants know that a 50 percent reduction in stream-water use would impact residents, businesses and agriculture negatively, and want to see more consideration of these existing uses.

Close to 3,000 people have signed circulated petitions to implore the CWRM to ensure that Interim In-stream Flow Standards, or IIFS, set for East and West Maui continue to provide water to sustain off-stream uses for homes, businesses, county water systems, community facilities and agriculture.

Petition signers get that the recommended 50 percent reduction in water diverted from streams is not a "big-business issue" as some want to tout, but a concern that impacts them.

As members of a community that wants to keep Maui green, people recognize that water means not only sustaining, but growing our agricultural industry. And the latter takes water — water needed by Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Co. and other farmers for their crops. Therefore, we must look at comprehensive solutions that do not injure agriculture.

Under the State Water Code, Chapter 174C, Hawaii Revised Statutes, the CWRM has the responsibility of establishing IIFS. In doing so, according to its Web site, the commission is to "weigh the importance of the present or potential in-stream values with the importance of the present or potential uses of water for non-stream purposes, including the economic impact of restricting such uses." Currently, we feel more consideration must be given to the economic impact of eliminating 50 percent of the current in-stream flow.

Our message, along with the public outcry, is not that no water should be returned to the streams. We, too, want stream health. Our concern is with the recommendation on the hefty

amount of water — that the community needs and relies on — to be returned to the streams, and the negative effects removing this much water would have on the economy, environment and social well-being. The message is about balance.

While IIFS is a huge, fast-moving issue, the general public is not well versed in the issue. Another 19 East Maui streams are now under review, and only one public hearing was scheduled this past Thursday. If you missed that hearing, you still can be heard.

You can sign the petition. Contact the Maui Chamber of Commerce at 871-7711 to have the petition faxed or e-mailed to you, or visit our office. You also can write letters or e-mail the CWRM, the governor, mayor and elected officials, and share your concerns. Comments will be taken through the end of this month.

We urge everyone to participate in this important discussion that directly impacts our way and quality of life.

■ *Pamela Tumpap is president of the Maui Chamber of Commerce.*