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Question1:

Question2:

Question3:

Question4: The Grasslands Reserve Program should not place grasslands and native forests in opposition to each other.

The Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP) as authorized in the 2002 Farm Bill has good basic goals: to protect natural grasslands from urban development and conversion to agriculture, to conserve biodiversity, and to help farmers and ranchers maintain grazing opportunities. We strongly believe that conservation on private lands needs to ensure that both the economic needs of the landowner as well as the ecological goals can be achieved. We are concerned that the GRP is limiting the future options of landowners who could benefit economically from restoring native forests on their land.. While grasslands certainly play a viable role in the ecology and economy of Hawaii, we are also concerned that lands enrolled in the GRP are constrained their management for ecological and biodiversity goals in that native trees may not be planted.

The law provides for easements or rental agreements that would prohibit "breaking the soil surface," thus preventing tree-planting. This provision protects native grasslands from being converted to non-native commercial tree plantations, and thus helps to conserve biodiversity in native grasslands. However, the law and rules allow application of the program to pastures dominated by naturalized (non-native) grasses, to support the program goal to provide support for grazing opportunities. In Hawaii, all of the acreage that has been enrolled in the program was historically converted from native forest to non-native grasslands by the grazing of non-native animals, introduction of non-native grasses, and fire. During the period of the GRP rental agreement or easement (which may be permanent), the owner cannot restore the land to native forest without incurring a financial penalty. The provisions prohibiting tree-planting thus have the effect in Hawaii of limiting landowner choice, which can have both economic and ecological consequences. Because of the severe development pressures these landowners face, they should be given all the possible venues to protect and manage their land, whether they wish to have forests or grasslands.

The Grasslands Reserve Program should: (1) maintain options for the landowner in conserving a working landscape of grasslands and/or forests; and (2) avoid the inadvertent negative effects on native forest biodiversity of the current legislative language.

The following suggestions could help achieve the above objectives: (a) allow the unrestricted planting of native trees as well as native shrubs and forbs, without financial penalty, and (b) allow transfer of enrolled lands from the Grasslands Reserve Program to the Forest Legacy Program

or other USDA conservation programs, if the landowner desires to stop grazing and restore non-native grassland to native forestland. These changes should be retroactive to lands enrolled under the 2002 Farm Bill.

Question5:

Question6: