

WRITTEN TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY

By Kelly LaPorte, Outside Counsel for the Kamehameha Schools

Hearing Date: Tuesday, March 3, 2009 2:00 p.m., House Conference Room 325

Tuesday, March 3, 2009

TO: Representative Jon Riki Karamatsu, Chair

Representative Ken Ito, Vice Chair Members of the Committee on Judiciary

SUBJECT: Support of H.B. No. 951 - Relating to Landowner Liability for Natural Conditions.

My name is Kelly LaPorte, and I am outside counsel for the Kamehameha Schools. I am providing this testimony in support of H.B. No. 951 relating to landowner liability for natural conditions. This Bill codifies common law that protects State, County and private landowners who have not altered the natural condition of their land.

This Bill provides clarity with respect to liability from naturally occurring dangers, insulating up-slope landowners who have not altered the natural environment on their property, and is consistent with both common law and the Restatement of the Law of Torts. In two recent court cases involving a rockfall, *Onishi v. Vaughan*, and a massive mud and boulder slide, *Makaha Valley Towers v. Board of Water Supply*, after substantial litigation, the First Circuit Court in both instances acknowledged the applicability of this law when no artificial improvements have been constructed to create any additional risk. We have attached copies of the Hawai'i Revised Statute section that adopts common law, the treatises that restate this law, and the order in the *Onishi* case.

By codifying common law, this Bill provides certainty in Hawai'i law for natural conditions that exist on unaltered lands. Further, by expressly allowing minor improvements on land, it allows a reasonable use of natural land without triggering additional responsibilities. Expressly allowing minor improvements such as utility poles provides benefits to the community at large or, in the case of protective fences or warning signage, enhances safety. Importantly, the provision in this Bill that allows other, specified minor alterations of land, such as the *removal* of potentially dangerous natural conditions such as boulders or rocks, allows voluntary acts undertaken by either the landowner or owners of neighboring property without increasing the risk of liability.

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Tuesday, March 3, 2009

Representative Jon Riki Karamatsu, Chair Representative Ken Ito, Vice Chair Members of the Committee on Judiciary

This is essentially a Good Samaritan provision that will encourage cooperation in voluntarily undertaking such measures intended to enhance safety. In the absence of this provision, a landowner may be reluctant to remove or alter any natural condition or allow others to come onto the land to do the same for fear of losing protection afforded by the common law.

By expressly allowing minor alterations of the land, such as allowing recreational visitors like day hikers on a hiking path, this similarly promotes the reasonable use and enjoyment of natural land, without losing the protection of this law. The Hawai'i legislature has already deemed this an important public policy in its enactment of Chapter 520, which purpose is to "encourage owners of land to make land . . . available to the public for recreational purposes by limiting their liability towards person entering thereon for such purposes." This Bill is consistent with this purpose.

In the absence of this Bill, landowners who, to date, have kept their land in a natural condition will possess a disincentive to keep the land in its unaltered state because of potential liabilities. Instead, these landowners possess an incentive to either develop the land or sell it to third parties for development. To the extent that the State, Counties, and Public Land Trusts acquire unaltered land for preservation and conservation purposes, this Bill protects them. Passage of this Bill will promote sustainable communities by encouraging the retention of natural lands, while at the same time protecting consumers by fostering proper planning and consideration of appropriate safeguards. We have attached a table explaining the basis for each of the foregoing provisions and its practical application.

In sum, landowners — both private and government — should be insulated from liability from any damage as a result of the natural condition of the land as recognized by common law, and should be encouraged to allow limited, reasonable use of their natural lands and to voluntarily reduce risk of rockfalls without losing this protection. Kamehameha Schools respectfully requests that you pass this important Bill.

H.B. No. 951

Relating to landowner liability for natural conditions.

Benefits of statute

Provides certainty in the law regarding obligations for natural conditions that exist on unaltered land:

- Expressly allows minor improvements on land such as erecting utility pole and signs without triggering additional obligations.
- > Expressly provides exception for specific, minor alterations of land taken for preservation or prudent management of land.
- > Avoids unnecessary litigation with respect to passive landowners who do not alter natural state of land.
- > Protects consumers by fostering proper planning and consideration of safeguards in risk-creating activities outside the land.

Encourages sustainability of communities:

- > Encourages retention of natural land within developed areas.
 - o In the absence of statute, owners of natural land possess:
 - · disincentive to retain land in natural state because of potential liabilities from naturally occurring land failures; and
 - incentive to either develop natural land or sell natural land to third parties for development.
- > Allows modest recreational activities (walking, hiking) on natural land without creating additional obligations of landowner.

Encourages voluntary measures to reduce risks of naturally occurring land failures without triggering additional obligations.

Encourages prudent land management practices such as plantings and weed, brush, and tree removal without triggering liability.

Language	Basis for Provision	Practical Application
§663-B Land failure on unimproved land caused by natural condition; liability. A landowner shall not be liable for any damage, injury, or harm to persons or property outside the boundaries of such land caused by any naturally occurring land failure originating on unimproved land.	This codifies common law, which is adopted in Hawaii under HRS § 1-1, and is consistent with the Restatement (Second) of Torts § 363 as to "natural conditions," and expressly applies it to landowners.	Under this common law rule, if the landowner does not create any condition that creates a risk of harm to others outside the land caused by a naturally occurring land failure, the landowner has no affirmative duty to remedy conditions on the property of purely natural origin. The First Circuit Court recognized and applied this common law rule in 2005 in the Onishi lawsuit. This rule did not alter the outcome in that case, however, because the court held that the factual issue of whether artificial conditions (i.e., nonnatural conditions created by upslope City roadway, drainage culvert, or privately owned driveway that diverted water) caused the rockfall would have to be determined by a jury. Given these substantial alterations of the land in Onishi, the proposed statute would not have provided immunity to landowners because the land was improved (not "unimproved").
		This provision does <i>not</i> alter any obligations that a landowner may have to persons <i>on</i> that landowner's property, such as the State's duty to warn visitors to the Sacred Falls State Park that the First Circuit Court held was violated following the 1999 rockfall that killed and injured visitors to the public park.

§663-C Natural condition. For purposes of this part, the natural condition of land exists and shall not be considered altered or improved notwithstanding that the following has occurred: (1) Minor improvements, including the installation or maintenance of utility poles and signage;

This provides *clarity* and *certainty* in the application of the law by expressly providing that *minor improvements* placed on unimproved land that are not likely to increase the risk of naturally occurring land failures will not trigger an affirmative duty upon landowners to remedy conditions on the property of purely natural origin.

An owner of unimproved land may erect signage on the land that warns visitors of dangers that may exist on the land, or may provide easements to allow electrical or telephone companies to place utility poles that provide service to the public, without fear that doing so would trigger additional obligations to remediate any conditions unrelated to such improvements. In the absence of allowing for such minor improvements to be placed on natural land, landowners may refuse to install minor improvements that are intended to safeguard against dangers within the land. Further, this may restrict the availability of land needed by utilities to provide service to the public.

(2) Minor alterations undertaken for the preservation or prudent management of the unimproved land, including the installation or maintenance of fences, trails, or pathways; (3) Maintenance activities, including forest plantings and weed, brush, boulder, or tree removal; or

This similarly provides *clarity* and *certainty* in the application of the law by expressly providing that *minor alterations* undertaken on unimproved land for preservation or maintenance purposes will not trigger an affirmative duty upon landowners to remedy conditions on the property of purely natural origin.

An owner may make *minor* alterations to natural land, such as unpaved trails or paths or installing fences to protect a watershed area, that are used for management of the land, or allow visitors to traverse the land for recreational purposes such as hiking with minimal disturbance to the natural conditions, without losing protection of this law. This promotes the reasonable use of the land that is unlikely to create additional danger of land failures, and allows the visitation of natural land without creating additional liabilities.

(4) The removal or securing of rocks or	An owner of unimproved land may also
boulders undertaken to reduce risk to	volunteer to remove rocks or boulders that
downslope properties.	may pose a danger to others outside the
	land without triggering a duty to remedy
	all other conditions of purely natural
	origin, or allow downslope residents to do
	the same without creating additional duties
	owed to downslope residents. Essentially,
	this encourages Good Samaritan acts
	without increasing liability. In the absence
	of this provision, a landowner may be
	reluctant to undertake any minor
	alterations that are intended to reduce risk
	because of a fear of losing immunity under
	the common law rule.

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§ 1-1. Common law of the State; exceptions.

The common law of England, as ascertained by English and American decisions, is declared to be the common law of the State of Hawaii in all cases, except as otherwise expressly provided by the Constitution or laws of the United States, or by the laws of the State, or fixed by Hawaiian judicial precedent, or established by Hawaiian usage; provided that no person shall be subject to criminal proceedings except as provided by the written laws of the United States or of the State. [L 1892, c 57, § 5; am L 1903, c 32, § 2; RL 1925, § 1; RL 1935, § 1; RL 1945, § 1; RL 1955, § 1-1; HRS § 1-1]

PROSSER AND KEETON ON THE LAW OF TORTS

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WEST PUBLISHING CO. ST. PAUL, MINN. 1984 be the misrepresentation as to the character of the property."

Natural Conditions

The one important limitation upon the responsibility of the possessor of land to those outside of his premises has been the traditional rule, of both the English and the American courts, that he is under no affirmative duty to remedy conditions of purely natural origin upon his land, although they may be highly dangerous or inconvenient to his neighbors.40 The origin of this, in both countries, lay in an early day when much land, in fact most, was unsettled or uncultivated, and the burden of inspecting it and putting it in safe condition would have been not only unduly onerous, but out of all proportion to any harm likely to result. Thus it has been held that the landowner is not lia-

39. See infra. 9 61.

- Second Restatement of Torts, § 363. See Noel, Nuisances from Land in its Natural Condition, 1948, 56
 Harv.L. Rev. 772; Goodhart, Liability for Things Naturally on the Land, 1980, 4 Camb.L.J. 13.
- 41. Roberts v. Harrison, 1897, 101 Ga. 773, 28 S.E.
- 42. Pontardawe R. D. C. v. Moore-Gwynn, [1929] 1 Ch. 656. But see Sprecher v. Adamson Companies, 1981, 30 Cal.3d 358, 178 Cal.Rptr. 783, 636 P.2d 1121 (duty of due care to prevent landslide).
 - 41. See supra, note 25.
- 44. Giles v. Walker, 1890, 24 Q.B.D. 656 (thistles); cf. Salmon v. Delaware, L. & W. R. Co., 1875, 38 N.J.L. 5 (leaves); Langer v. Goode, 1911, 21 N.D. 462, 131 N.W. 258 (wild mustard).
- 45. Brady v. Warren, [1909] 2 Ir.Rep. 632; Stearn v. Prentice Bros., [1919] 1 K.B. 394; Seaboard Air Line Railroad Co. v. Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike Authority, 1961, 202 Va. 1029, 121 S.E.2d 499 (pigeons); Merriam v. McConnell, 1961, 31 Ill.App.2d 241, 175 N.E.2d 293 (box elder bugs). Nor, perhaps, for horses kept by a tenant. Blake v. Dunn Farms, Inc., 1980, Ind., 413 N.E.2d 560. Contra, perhaps, for horses kept by an employee. See Misterek v. Washington Mineral Products, Inc., 1975, 85 Wn.2d 166, 521 P.2d 805. Cf. Weber v. Madison, Iowa 1977, 251 N.W.2d 523 (geese); King v. Blue Mountain Forest Association, 1956, 100 N.H. 212, 123 A.2d 151 (wild Prussian boar, fourth or fifth generation from original imports).
- 46. See Keys v. Romley, 1966, 64 Cal.2d 396, 50 Cal. Rptr. 278, 412 P.2d 529; Mohr v. Gault, 1860, 10 Wis. 513; Livezey v. Schmidt, 1895, 96 Ky. 441, 29 S.W. 25.
- 47. Rocksfellow v. Rockwell City, Iowa 1974, 217 N.W.2d 248; Bailey v. Blacker, 1929, 267 Mass. 73, 165

ble for the existence of a foul swamp," for falling rocks, " for uncut weeds obstructing the view of motorists at an intersection, " for thistles growing on his land," for harm done by indigenous animals, " or for the normal, natural flow of surface water." Closely allied to this is the generally accepted holding that an abutting owner is under no duty to remove ice and snow which has fallen upon his own land or upon the highway."

On the other hand, if the occupier has himself altered the condition of the premises, as by erecting a structure which discharges water upon the sidewalk, is setting up a parking lot upon which water will collect, is weakening rocks by the construction of a highway, damming a stream so that it forms a malarial pond, is planting a row of trees next to the highway, digging out part of a hill, or piling sand or plowing a field so that the

- N.E. 699; Moore v. Gadsden, 1881, 87 N.Y. 84. Ordinances requiring the property owner to remove snow and ice usually are construed to impose no duty to any private individual. See supra, \$ 36.
- 48. See Leahan v. Cochran, 1901, 178 Mass. 566, 60 N.E. 382; Tremblay v. Harmony Mills, 1902, 171 N.Y. 598, 64 N.E. 501; Updegraff v. City of Ottumwa, 1929, 210 Iowa 382, 228 N.W. 928. Nots, 1937, 21 Minn.L. Rev. 708, 713; cf. Harris v. Thompson, Ky.1978, 497 S.W.2d 422 (broken water pipe caused ice on road). But see North Little Rock Transportation Co. v. Finkbeiner, 1967, 248 Ark. 596, 420 S.W.2d 874 (Finky not liable for water in street from sprinkler system).
- 49. Moore v. Standard Paint & Glass Co. of Pueblo, 1960, 145 Colo. 151, 358 P.2d 38. But see Williams v. United States, E.D.Pa.1981, 507 F.Supp. 121 (no liability, under "hills and ridges" doctrine, for slippery sheet of ice with no ridges or elevations in parking lot).
- 50. McCarthy v. Ference, 1948, 358 Pa. 485, 58 A.2d 49.
- 51. Mills v. Hall, N.Y.1832, 9 Wend. 315; Towaliga Falls Power Co. v. Sims, 1909, 6 Ga.App. 749, 65 S.E. 844. Cf. Andrews v. Andrews, 1955, 242 N.C. 382, 88 S.E.2d 88 (artificial pond collecting wild geese, which destroyed plaintiff's crops).
- 52. Coates v. Chinn, 1958, 51 Cal.2d 304, 332 P.2d 289 (cultivated trees). Accord, Wisher v. Fowler, 1970, 7 Cal.App.3d 225, 86 Cal.Rptr. 582 (maintaining hedge). Cf. Crowhurst v. Amersham Burial Board, 1878, 4 Exch.Div. 5, 48 L.J.Ex. 109 (planting poisonous trees near boundary line). But there may be no liability for merely failing to cut weeds. See supra, note 25.
- 53. Fubbri v. Regis Forcier, Inc., 1975, 114 R.I. 207, 330 A.2d 807.

RESTATEMENT OF THE LAW Second

TORTS 2d

Volume 2 §§ 281-503

As Adopted and Promulgated

BY

THE AMERICAN LAW INSTITUTE

AT WASHINGTON, D. C.

May 25, 1963

and

May 22, 1964

ST. PAUL, MINN.

American Law Institute Publishers 1965

§ 363. Natural Conditions

- (1) Except as stated in Subsection (2), neither a possessor of land, nor a vendor, lessor, or other transferor, is liable for physical harm caused to others outside of the land by a natural condition of the land.
- (2) A possessor of land in an urban area is subject to liability to persons using a public highway for physical harm resulting from his failure to exercise reasonable care to prevent an unreasonable risk of harm arising from the condition of trees on the land near the highway.

See Reporter's Notes.

Caveat:

The Institute expresses no opinion as to whether the rule stated in Subsection (2) may not apply to the possessor of land in a rural area.

Comment:

- The rule stated in Subsection (1) applies although the possessor, vendor, or lessor recognizes or should recognize that the natural condition involves a risk of physical harm to persons outside the land. Except under the circumstances in Subsection (2) of this Section, this is true although there is a strong probability that the natural condition will cause serious harm and the labor or expense necessary to make the condition reasonably safe is slight.
- b. Meaning of "natural condition of land." "Natural condition of the land" is used to indicate that the condition of land has not been changed by any act of a human being, whether the possessor or any of his predecessors in possession, or a third person dealing with the land either with or without the consent of the then possessor. It is also used to include the natural growth of trees, weeds, and other vegetation upon land not artificially made receptive to them. On the other hand, a structure erected upon land is a non-natural or artificial condition. as are trees or plants planted or preserved, and changes in the surface by excavation or filling, irrespective of whether they are harmful in themselves or become so only because of the subsequent operation of natural forces.
- c. Privilege of public authorities to remove danger. The fact that a possessor of land is not subject to liability for natural

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HEARDS DATE August, 2005 TOME 16:00 Am RIDGE HONDRABLE KAREN 5.5 AIRN

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ORDER GRANTING IN PART AND DENYING IN PART DEFENDANT VANCE N. VAUGHAN, SUCCESSOR TRUSTEE OF THE VANCE VAUGHAN REVOCABLE TRUST'S CROSS MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT FILED ON JULY 10, 2005, AND VANCE N. VAUGHAN AND KERRY N. VAUGHAN'S SUBSTANTIVE JOINDER FILED ON JULY 18, 2005

On July 20, 2005 Defendant Vance N. Vaughan, Successor Trustee of the Vance Vaughan Revocable Trust filed a Cross Motion For Summary Judgment. Vance N. Vaughan, Individually, and Kerry N. Vaughan filed a Substantive Joinder to the Cross Motion for Summary Judgment on July 28, 2005. Said motion came on for hearing before the Honorable Karen S.S. Ahn on August 8, 2005 at 10:00 a.m. At that hearing, Plaintiffs were represented by Wesley W. Ichida, Esq., and Ann C. Kerste, Esq., Defendant Hiroko Vaughan was represented by Michael J. McGuight, Esq., Defendant Hawaii Castle Corporation was represented by Brad S. Petrus, Esq., Defendant City and County of Honolulu was represented by Derek Mayeshiro, Esq., Defendants Vance N. Vaughan, Individually, and Kerry Vaughan were represented by Steve K. Hisaka, Esq., and Defendant Vance N. Vaughan, Successor Trustee of the Vance Vaughan Revocable Trust, was represented by Amanda J. Weston, Esq. The Court reviewed all memoranda and affidavits submitted, heard the arguments of counsel and took the motion under advisement. Being fully advised in the mapter,

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that Defendant Vance N. Vaughan's, Successor Trustee of the Vance Vaughan Revocable Trust, Cross Motion For Summary Judgment filed on July 20, 2005, and Subsantive Joinder is granted in part and denied in part as follows. The Court holds that under the common law as adopted in the State of Hawaii and as reflected in the Restatement 2d, Torus.

 A real property owner owes no duty with respect to natural conditions on his property; Under the common law as adopted in the State of Hawaii and as reflected in the Restatement 2d. Torts: 1) A real property owner owes no duty with respect to natural conditions on his property;

 However, a real property owner does owe a duty to exercise reasonable care with respect to non-natural or artificial conditions on his property.

The Court finds that a germine issue of material fact exists as to the existence of nonexistence of an artificial condition which proximately caused the injuries of which Plaintiffs complain.

DATED:

Honolulu, Hawai'i.

DEC 2 3 2005

JUDGE OF THE ABOVE-ENTITLED COURT

APPROVED AS TO FORM:

JOHN M. PRICE, ESQ.
AMANDA J. WESTON, ESQ.
AMONDA J. WESTON, ESQ.
AMONDE N. VAUGHAN, SUCCESSOR
TRUSTEE OF THE VANCE VAUGHAN
REVOCABLE TRUST

CARRIES. OKINAGA, ESQ.
DEREK T. MAYESHIRO, ESQ.
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BRAD S. PETRUS, ESQ.
Attorney for Defendant
HAWAII CASTLE CORPORATION

2) However, a real property owner owes a duty to exercise reasonable care with respect to non-natural or artificial conditions on his property.

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