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DEPARTMENT OF LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES
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LAND
STATE PARKS

Testimony of
RYAN K.P. KANAKA'OLE
Acting Chairperson

Before the House Committee on
HEALTH

Friday, February 13, 2026
9:00 AM
State Capitol, Conference Room 329

In consideration of
HOUSE BILL 1765
RELATING TO SPEARFISHING SAFETY

House Bill 1765 proposes to require all spearguns or pole spears sold, leased, rented or otherwise commercially distributed for use in the State to display a permanently affixed, engraved, or otherwise made durable warning regarding the dangers of hypoxia associated with breath-hold diving. **The Department of Land and Natural Resources (Department) appreciates the intent of this bill and offers the following comments.**

Hypoxia, including shallow-water blackout, is a serious risk associated with breath-hold spearfishing. While it is important to educate new or unaware spearfishers to the dangers of hypoxia, it may not be enough to reduce risk. Hawai'i's spearfishing community over the years has mourned the loss of multiple individuals who have succumbed to shallow-water blackout, some of whom had decades of experience in deep-water breath-hold diving. A more effective way to prevent loss of life may be through in-depth outreach and education targeted at those who already participate in breath-hold spearfishing and are aware of shallow-water blackout. Along with a targeted outreach campaign, this could include the development and promotion of affordable in-person freediving classes taught by qualified professionals. These classes, of which there are currently limited offerings across the State, focus not only on ability to dive, but the knowledge and techniques to do so safely.

The Department additionally notes that a sizable component of those breath-hold diving in Hawai'i may never purchase a speargun or pole spear as freediving for shell collecting, wildlife viewing, underwater photography, and general recreation is rapidly growing in

popularity. Future outreach efforts should include these individuals as they incur the same risk of hypoxia as spearfishers.

Lastly, the Department recognizes that Hawai'i has a long history of selling locally made, home-built, and hand-crafted spearguns and pole spears. Several of the most popular speargun and poles spear brands in Hawai'i today are built in-State, often by a single individual. In recognition of these small businesses, the Department requests that economic burden of the labeling requirement be considered.

Mahalo for the opportunity to comment on this measure.



Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in **strong support of HB1765**.

My name is Niki Roderick, and I am the founder of FreediveSafe Hawaii, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization established in 2020 in response to a rise in freediving and spearfishing-related fatal accidents in Hawaii, particularly among youth.

For the past five years, I have dedicated my work to sharing freediving/spearfishing safety education across Hawaii reaching over 3000 Hawaii residents with no cost training. I have been listening closely to the spearfishing community statewide — recreational, subsistence, and cultural practitioners alike. This work has been guided by the community and the information formed comes directly from time spent with students, divers, families, instructors, first responders, and community members, identifying where awareness is lacking and where education can most effectively save lives.

In 2020 alone, Hawaii lost 13 divers to spearfishing-related incidents. I have met many of the families and the dive buddies affected by these tragedies. They live with immense and lasting pain from the sudden loss of a healthy, athletic son, friend or cousin, who was doing what they loved — fishing, diving, and connecting with the ocean. I have heard firsthand accounts from across the state—stories of close calls, preventable tragedies, and communities permanently impacted by loss. I have spoken with parents who were unaware that hypoxia and shallow-water blackout pose serious risks to their children, as well as with young divers who were unaware of the risks associated with hypoxia and freediver blackout.

Freediver Blackout or Shallow Water Blackout is not intuitive. It is silent, fast, and often fatal. I have personally experienced freediver blackout five times and was able to return home safely each time because of proper dive safety awareness and adherence to safety protocols. Divers frequently report feeling “fine” moments before losing consciousness. Without awareness, there is no warning

and no opportunity to self-rescue alone. With a safety system in place, the incident is over within seconds and everyone comes home safe.

What I hear consistently from the spearfishing community is not opposition, but support. Many individuals openly acknowledge they were never taught about blackout risks and wish they had known sooner. Parents, in particular, strongly support safety measures that ensure they can support their children to participate in the sport with greater safety awareness and informed choice.

This proposal does not ban spearfishing, restrict access, or interfere with cultural or subsistence practices. It supports our spearfishing community by ensuring that basic, life-saving information is provided at the point of entry into the sport, so individuals and families can make informed decisions that protect lives.

Spearfishing is the second leading activity associated with Hawaii resident ocean drownings. That reality underscores the urgent need for proactive education. Safety labeling is a minimal, reasonable, and proven public-health approach — one already applied to household items, power tools, and recreational equipment.

This bill is about awareness, transparency, prevention, and respect — respect for the ocean, the spearfishing community, and the lives of those who participate in this sport.

I strongly support HB1765. Mahalo for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Niki Roderick

FreediveSafe! Hawaii
75-5737 Kuakini Highway, #202
Kailua-Kona, Hawaii 96740
www.freedivesafe.org
Ph: 808-900-3331

HB-1765

Submitted on: 2/11/2026 6:16:13 AM

Testimony for HLT on 2/13/2026 9:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Skee Saplan	Skeeprong	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha

My name is Skee Saplan, born and raised in the Big Island and have been here for 50 years. I have been diving and fishing my whole life as a way to provide food for my family and friends. I grew up surrounded by elders who mentored me directly through instruction, example and story telling. I personally have had close calls with SWB, and it was relatively unheard and spoken of in the generations before me. So with all the knowledge that was passed down, breath hold safety wasn't one of the lessons passed on. And for our younger divers, the internet glorifies the sport of spearfishing without much talk of the dangers. Something as simple as a label could alert the end user to research and I look into the safety concerns, and possibly and hopefully educate themselves.

For two years, I've been labeling my custom-made pole spears with freediver blackout safety labels—a simple, low-cost way to increase safety awareness. Requiring all manufacturers to do the same through HB1765 is a common-sense step that protects new and experienced divers alike. It's an easy win for safety that shouldn't be delayed. I thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony

Skee Saplan

Skeeprong

LATE

HB-1765

Submitted on: 2/12/2026 9:18:08 AM

Testimony for HLT on 2/13/2026 9:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Lauren Manuel	Makana Hawai'i Incentives	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee,

I am writing in strong support of HB1765, a critical measure to enhance safety protections for ocean users (particularly divers) Hawai'i's waters.

Hawai'i's ocean is central to our culture, economy, and way of life. Each year, thousands of residents and visitors participate in snorkeling, freediving, and scuba diving activities across our islands. While these experiences are transformative and deeply meaningful, they also carry inherent risks. Strengthening safety standards, increasing visibility protections, and reinforcing best practices for marine operations are necessary steps to prevent avoidable accidents and fatalities.

Divers are especially vulnerable in shared ocean spaces where vessels, personal watercraft, and other users may not easily see them. Clear, enforceable safety measures help ensure that operators maintain safe distances, exercise appropriate caution, and prioritize human life above all else. Proactive legislation such as HB1765 reflects responsible stewardship of our marine environment and a commitment to public safety.

From both a community and economic perspective, safeguarding divers protects Hawai'i's people and visitors alike. Preventable accidents negatively impact families, local businesses, and our broader visitor industry. Investing in stronger safety protocols is not a burden; it is a necessary safeguard that reinforces confidence, accountability, and responsible ocean use.

HB1765 represents a thoughtful step toward preventing tragedy before it occurs. I respectfully urge the committee to pass this measure and continue advancing policies that protect residents, visitors, and the integrity of our ocean resources.

Mahalo for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of HB1765.

Sincerely,
Lauren Manuel

Makana Hawai'i Incentives

HB-1765

Submitted on: 2/10/2026 4:45:59 PM

Testimony for HLT on 2/13/2026 9:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Jennifer Bien	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair and Members of the Committee,

I respectfully submit testimony in support of HB1765, which would require safety warning labels on spearguns and pole spears sold or distributed in Hawai‘i, along with educational materials.

Water safety remains a serious public health concern in Hawai‘i, where ocean recreation is part of daily life. Spearfishing and freediving are consistently associated with ocean drowning incidents involving Hawai‘i residents, highlighting the need for greater awareness of risks such as hypoxia, often called shallow water blackout, and drowning.

In Hawai‘i, we all understand how quickly the ocean can become dangerous when risks aren’t fully known. Providing clear safety information at the point of purchase is a simple, low-cost step that can improve awareness and help prevent avoidable drownings.

This measure represents a reasonable, education-focused approach that does not restrict lawful ocean activity. For these reasons, I support HB1765.

Mahalo for the opportunity to submit testimony. Jennifer

HB-1765

Submitted on: 2/10/2026 4:58:43 PM

Testimony for HLT on 2/13/2026 9:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Allison Schaefer	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB1765 — Spearfishing Safety Labeling

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Allison Schaefer, and I am testifying in strong support of **HB1765**, which establishes safety-warning requirements for spearfishing equipment to reduce preventable hypoxia-related drownings.

Breath-hold diving associated with spearfishing carries a well-documented risk of hypoxia and shallow-water blackout. These events can occur without warning, even among experienced divers, and often result in sudden loss of consciousness, serious injury, or death. The Hawaii Water Safety Plan, released in 2025 by the Hawaii Water Safety Coalition, identifies hypoxia-related drownings as a growing and urgent public-health concern, particularly among young people engaged in freediving and spearfishing.

This bill was brought forward by **FreediveSafe! Hawaii**, founded in 2020 and a member of the Hawaii Water Safety Coalition. It's the only organization in the state dedicated specifically to preventing freediving and spearfishing fatalities. Their work fills a critical gap in Hawaii's drowning-prevention landscape. They focus on raising awareness about hypoxia, teaching proven safety protocols, and ensuring that lifesaving education is free and equitable—especially for youth ages 12 to 25, subsistence communities, and those learning through cultural practice.

The need for action is clear. According to the Department of Health, **freediving drownings increased from two in 2022 to eleven in 2023**, approaching the state's highest-ever total of thirteen deaths in 2020. These are not isolated incidents; they reflect a trend that mirrors the rising popularity of spearfishing and breath-hold diving across the islands.

As the lead writer of the Hawaii Water Safety Plan, I am painfully aware that Hawaii has the second highest drowning rate in the nation for residents, and our Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders face far greater risks, according to data from the Hawaii Department of Health and from other epidemiologists working in the state.

As a mother, who has lost her own child to drowning in Hawaii, I urge state lawmakers to take steps to stem the drowning trends and to say, "Not one more death."

Drowning is preventable, and HB1765 takes a simple, effective, and culturally respectful approach to managing risk. It does not restrict lawful, traditional, or subsistence fishing practices. Instead, it ensures that commercially sold spearguns and pole spears carry clear, durable warnings about hypoxic risk—like the safety disclosures required for other recreational equipment. Research and experience show that increased awareness saves lives. A visible, standardized warning is a low-cost, high-impact intervention that supports both public safety and informed choice.

This bill aligns with the Hawaii Water Safety Plan’s emphasis on education, risk communication, and upstream prevention. It also supports the work of community-based organizations like FreediveSafe! Hawaii, whose outreach, training, and cultural grounding make them essential partners in reducing drowning statewide.

HB1765 is a balanced, common-sense measure that honors Hawaii’s fishing traditions while addressing a preventable cause of death. I respectfully urge the committee to pass this bill.

Mahalo,

Allison Schaefer

HB-1765

Submitted on: 2/11/2026 9:09:43 AM

Testimony for HLT on 2/13/2026 9:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Jamil Newirth	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Our Hawaii based cancer nonprofit, UVSC, has worked with Freedive Safe Hawaii, who provides invaluable safety training to both kids and adults engaging in freediving or spearfishing activities. These dangerous activities are common in Hawaii and unfortunately, unnecessary deaths occur each year here in Hawaii. I strongly support the passing of Bill 1765, to help prevent these unnecessary deaths in our community. I could only imagine, if a friend or relative passed away while diving and knowing it could have been prevented with proper safety training. The passing of this Bill would help prevent these avoidable deaths in our community and help educate the next generation on safety while diving.

HB-1765

Submitted on: 2/11/2026 2:34:38 PM

Testimony for HLT on 2/13/2026 9:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Andrea Kawabata	Individual	Oppose	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha,

While I understand the heartfelt thoughts behind this bill, I DO NOT support this bill as written. It does not address the underlying need, which is education (face-to-face, online, etc.), NOT regulation with a label. Functional spearfishing gear doesn't kill people when used and handled properly.

Thank you.

HB-1765

Submitted on: 2/11/2026 3:16:37 PM

Testimony for HLT on 2/13/2026 9:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Sarah Fairchild	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I strongly support this bill. As a founding member of the Hawaii Water Safety Coalition, I recognize that most of the drowning deaths related to spearfishing in Hawaii are preventable with informed safety practices. We have lost too many teens and young adults. Requiring warning labels on gear is a simple way to inform consumers that hazards exist but are preventable.

HB-1765

Submitted on: 2/11/2026 4:54:23 PM

Testimony for HLT on 2/13/2026 9:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Dylan Currier	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha,

My name is Dylan Currier, and I support HB1765. I believe this bill will help enlighten parents to the inherent risks associated with spearfishing while breath hold diving.

I am a professional freediving instructor and instructor trainer with Freediving Instructors International, and have been teaching freediving education and safety courses in Hawai'i for 10 years. I hold the position of Lead Educator for FreediveSafe Hawai'i, a non-profit established in 2020 to combat the rise in resident drowning fatalities resulting from spearfishing and breath-hold diving activities, where we work with local schools and communities to educate the youth and parents on the inherit risks of freediving, how to mitigate them, and how proper freediving supervision and safety training saves lives.

I originally found my love for freediving through spearfishing, and spearfishing is still one my favorite things to do in life. Just last month, I landed a world record otaru on polespear, a 22.2lb skipjack tuna. I believe in the sustainability of spearfishing as a selective method of harvesting fish with zero bycatch, and I greatly admire the rich history of spearfishing in Hawaiian culture. By no means do I ever want to see spearfishing restricted through regulation. But I believe that parents should have more information when purchasing a speargun for their kids, because many people are unfamiliar with the inherent risks of hypoxia associated with breathhold diving. Freediving safety, education and supervision makes the difference between life and death, and a safety warning label would ensure awareness to all consumers.

I lost my best friend to a blackout when he was traveling in 2024. He was the first person to take me spearfishing, and is the reason I found my path in life. I truly believe that education is key, as he had never taken a course, and I know it would have saved his life, if only he had a trained safety diver with him.

This bill will give parents the power to make an informed decision when purchasing a speargun with the best interest of their kids in mind. I think that is a reasonable measure that absolutely ought to move forward. At the very least, it could spark an important conversation.

HB-1765

Submitted on: 2/11/2026 9:08:53 PM

Testimony for HLT on 2/13/2026 9:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Uilani Naipo	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I support this measure.

LATE

HB-1765

Submitted on: 2/12/2026 9:32:23 PM

Testimony for HLT on 2/13/2026 9:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Brandon Koskie	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha, my name is Brandon Koskie, and I am in support of HB1765. Many people who are introduced to or discover diving/spearfishing do not immediately know the risks it carries and may be unaware of the physical dangers and physiological effects that come with the activity. The beginners usually go alone to spearfish. Some learn later down the line the need for buddy safety, or they don't and continue down a dangerous path. Some live, and some don't. So if having a warning on a piece of equipment saves a life, it is absolutely worth it. Just because one crosses the street a hundred times blind and lives does not mean it is safe. We need to make it clear that diving alone is never safe or okay. Everyone says, "I know my limits", "I am only diving 20ft". I know people who have lost family and friends to blackouts. The more awareness we bring to this matter, the better.