



**UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM**  
**‘ŌNAEHANA KULANUI O HAWAII**

Legislative Testimony  
Hō‘ike Mana‘o I Mua O Ka ‘Aha‘ōlelo

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Testimony Presented Before the  
Senate Committee on Agriculture and Environment  
and  
Senate Committee on Health and Human Services  
April 17, 2026 at 3:02 p.m.

By  
Bonnie Irwin  
Chancellor  
University of Hawai‘i at Hilo

HCR 33 – ENCOURAGING HAWAII COUNTY, IN COLLABORATION WITH THE PUAKŌ COMMUNITY, DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS, TO COMPLETE THE PUAKŌ SEWAGE PROJECT.

Chairs Gabbard and San Buenaventura, Vice Chairs Richards and McKelvey, and Members of the Committees:

The University of Hawai‘i at Hilo (UH Hilo) submits testimony in support of HCR 33, which encourages Hawai‘i County, in collaboration with the Puakō Community, Department of Health, and other Stakeholders, to complete the Puakō Sewage Project.

UH Hilo is planning the development of the Puakō Marine Center at Puakō, South Kohala, Hawai‘i Island for teaching and research. The impressive coral reefs at Puakō are among the best developed and most diverse in Hawai‘i. Coral reefs are in peril around the world, and Puakō has the potential of becoming the best hands-on living laboratory to promote understanding and conservation of one of Earth’s most precious resources. Numerous scientific studies have been conducted at Puakō by UH faculty because of the unique characteristics, clear waters, and easy access. However, this research work has been difficult to carry out because field bases have to be established far away from the area, either in Kailua-Kona or Hilo.

The Puakō Marine Center would provide essential infrastructure to train students of all ages from across the state in science, Hawaiian culture, and conservation mauka to makai in Kohala and North Kona. UH Hilo will be the stewards of the Puakō Marine Center, which will serve as a collaborative gateway, integrating the expertise of University of Hawai‘i researchers with state and federal agencies and external partners at US and international universities to address critical Pacific marine conservation and climate resilience goals. By offering specialized shore-based access to diverse reef ecosystems, the center acts as a premier international hub for visiting scientists and students to conduct high-impact research and hands-on environmental education. In addition, the Center would also serve as a resource for the community that currently has limited meeting and gathering spaces.

A sewage system at Puakō would save millions of dollars for the construction of the Puakō Marine Center. UH's 6 year CIP plan identifies the Puakō Marine Center as a priority capital project. Presently, awarding any substantial construction permits at the site, which sits in the Coastal Zone Management Area, requires the initial construction of a small wastewater treatment plant. However, if there was a sewage system at Puakō that the Puakō Marine Center could connect into, no on-site wastewater treatment plant would need to be built and the associated costs would be saved.

UH Hilo's Marine Science department is uniquely positioned to provide research, data and environmental monitoring essential for the success of the Puakō Sewage Project. Given the area's complex hydrology, UH Hilo researchers can utilize stable isotope analysis and dye-tracing studies to map precisely how land-based contaminants travel through the porous volcanic rock into the nearshore reef system. the project's engineering solutions translate into measurable ecological recovery.

Numerous studies, including collaboration with UH Hilo faculty, have been done to document that sewage from Puakō is impacting water quality at the shoreline and having a negative impact on the coral reef. Dr. Wiegner and colleagues (2021) document how with the treatment of sewage at a wastewater treatment plant was the only way "sewage from Puakō would be completely removed from Puakō's groundwater as it will enter into a sewer system." To enhance coral resiliency to disease, including coral bleaching, removing land-based sources of pollution, including excess nutrients from sewage, from coral reefs is one of the top management actions (UH Social Science Research institute, 2017).

We request that UH Hilo be included as a stakeholder and research resource in future discussions regarding completion of the Puakō Sewage Project. Strong consideration should also be given to inclusion of the Puakō Marine Center be included in design considerations, including location of a sewer and volume considerations for wastewater treatment.

Mahalo for the opportunity to submit testimony on this resolution.

**HCR-33**

Submitted on: 4/14/2026 2:54:45 PM

Testimony for AEN on 4/17/2026 3:02:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Ted Bohlen	Testifying for Hawaii Reef and Ocean Coalition	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

**STRONG SUPPORT!**

The Puako reef has declined markedly (from 70 to 7% cover)!in large part because of wastewater from cesspools. The community has been working hard on solutions for many years. The Hawaii Reef and Ocean Coalition agrees that it is time for the County to step up and do its part to protect the coral reefs!



April 15, 2026

Senate Committee on Agriculture & Environment, Health & Human Service  
Hawai'i State Legislature  
Via Electronic Transmission

Re: Testimony in SUPPORT of HCR33, Relating to the Green Fee  
Hearing: Friday, April 17, 2026 3:02pm via Videoconferencing

Aloha Chair Gabbard, Vice Chair Richards and members of the Committee on Agriculture and Environment; and Chair San Buenaventura, Vice Chair McKelvey and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services,

Wastewater Alternatives & Innovations (WAI) strongly supports HCR33. This bill encourages Hawai'i County, in collaboration with the Puakō community, Department of Health, and other stakeholders, to complete the Puakō Sewage Project. Coral reef cover has drastically declined in Puakō from 70% to 7%. This is too close to the point of irreversible collapse.

Along with their cultural and environmental benefits, Hawai'i's coral reefs generate an estimated \$863 million annually in economic value from tourism, recreation, research, and commerce. Reefs also protect us from storms, floods, tsunamis, hurricanes and sea level rise. Better sanitation systems protect public health and valuable natural resources like groundwater, streams, coral reefs and coastal areas. Protecting these systems is therefore both an environmental, public health and economic imperative.

Along with threats to public health and drinking water resources, the research shows that polluted wastewater poses significant harm to coral reefs and the near-shore environment.

In 2017, under Act 125 the State of Hawai'i required the upgrading of all cesspools by 2050 to a director-approved wastewater system, but this may not be enough to save Puakō reef in time.

WAI is an environmental non-profit dedicated to protecting our water resources by reducing sewage pollution from cesspools. Hawai'i has more than 80,000 cesspools across the state, discharging about 50 million gallons of raw sewage each day into Hawai'i's waters, contributing to groundwater contamination, harmful bacteria exposure, nutrient pollution, and coral reef degradation. We support more innovative, affordable, and eco-friendly solutions to wastewater management, and all bills and policies that contribute to the health and support of our coral reefs.

WAI respectfully submits testimony in support of HCR33 and appreciates the Legislature's continued leadership on protecting Hawai'i's coastal ecosystems and coral reefs. Mahalo for the opportunity to submit testimony.

Aloha,

*Stuart Coleman,*

*Jessica Kai Paisley,*

Stuart H. Coleman, Executive Director

Jessica Kai Paisley, Program & Legal Specialist



# A Community Dedicated to Saving Puakō Reef

Return the reef to its historic 70% coral coverage from its existing 7%.

[www.Puako4reefs.org](http://www.Puako4reefs.org) \* [Puako for Reefs Facebook](#)

Story map of Puakō: [Wahi Pana -A Sacred Place](#)

## HEARING FOR STATE SENATE COMMITTEES ON AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT and HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Wednesday, April 17, 2026 3:02 P.m.  
Conference Room 224, State Capitol

**TO: Senate Committee on Agriculture and Environment Economic Chair, Mike Gabbard, and Vice-Chair Tim Richards, and all members**

**Senate Committee on Health and Human Services Chair Joy San Buenaventura, and Vice-Chair Angus McKelvey, and all members**

**RE: House Concurrent Resolution 33. Encouraging Hawai'i County, in collaboration with the Puakō community, Department of Health, and other stakeholders, to complete the Puakō Sewage Project.**

Aloha Chairs, Vice Chairs, and Members of the Committees,

On behalf of Puakō For Reefs, we respectfully submit this testimony in strong support of HCR 33. This resolution advances effective, timely, and innovative wastewater solutions to protect and restore Hawai'i's nearshore waters and reefs.

Puakō represents both an urgent environmental crisis and a ready, community-driven solution. Testimony from residents, scientists, ocean users, and long-time property owners consistently highlights several shared realities:

- The reef is in significant decline, with decades of observed degradation directly linked to wastewater contamination.
- Cesspools and septic systems are not sufficient in coastal environments like Puakō.
- The impacts extend beyond the reef itself—affecting public health, cultural practices, fisheries, recreation, and the broader coastal economy.
- The community has already invested years of effort and funding and is ready to move forward.
- The project can serve as a model for other coastal communities.
- Delays increase environmental damage and long-term costs.



**PUAKŌ FOR  
REEFS**

# A Community Dedicated to Saving Puakō Reef

**Return the reef to its historic 70% coral coverage from its existing 7%.**

[www.Puako4reefs.org](http://www.Puako4reefs.org) \* [Puako for Reefs Facebook](#)

Story map of Puakō: [Wahi Pana -A Sacred Place](#)

While the State's mandate to eliminate cesspools by 2050 is important, it does not match the urgency in Puakō. The only effective long-term solution is full wastewater removal from the groundwater system.

Puakō is a Priority 1 area and a uniquely shared coastline. Protecting this reef protects far more than Puakō alone.

Because many of the people who have testified for other hearings have been so eloquent, and because their testimony does not "travel" with the Resolution, attached is a sampling of testimony in support of the Resolution.

We respectfully urge your support for HCR 33. Mahalo for your leadership.

For Puakō for Reefs Board members and its many volunteers,

**Karen Anderson**, Board Chair,  
**Stephanie Erickson**, Board Treasurer,  
**Barbara Bell**, Board Secretary, and  
**George Fry**, Board member.

attachment

**HCR-33**

Submitted on: 4/15/2026 6:33:30 AM

Testimony for AEN on 4/17/2026 3:02:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Georjean Adams	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

The Puako community is showing the way for collaborative, innovative approaches to solving our cesspool crisis. The State Legislature should remove barriers and contribute to such efforts that are selflessly working to malama ka aina.

I support this resolution.

**HCR-33**

Submitted on: 4/14/2026 8:14:54 PM

Testimony for AEN on 4/17/2026 3:02:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Lisa Shattuck	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I'm a 21 year Waimea reside and love our Puako neighbors and beaches. This is so incredibly important to have proper sewage control for our citizens and our reefs. Let's keep Hawai'i clean and beautiful and the place we know and love for generations to come.