

ACT 25

S.B. NO. 2059

A Bill for an Act Relating to State Symbols.

Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Hawaii:

SECTION 1. The legislature finds that the ‘ōhi‘a lehua (*Metrosideros polymorpha*) is a flowering evergreen tree that is an endemic plant species found only in the Hawaiian islands. The legislature recognizes the unique cultural, ecological, and economic importance of the ‘ōhi‘a lehua and its threatened existence. The legislature further finds that the ‘ōhi‘a lehua is one of the most referenced plants in Hawaiian mo‘olelo (stories), oli (chants), mele (songs), and hula

(dances). ‘Ōhi‘a lehua blossoms are iconic, symbolizing Pele’s fire, the blood of warfare, and the bounty of a generous chief. The beautiful and brilliant flowers make prized lei and are featured in art and clothing designs. The blossoms and foliage of the ‘ōhi‘a lehua were frequently used for medicinal purposes. Historically, the wood of ‘ōhi‘a was preferred for papa ku‘i ‘ai (poi boards) and was used to make tools and weapons. It is still regarded as a high-quality wood for construction and furniture.

The legislature further finds that ‘ōhi‘a lehua is a keystone species of Hawaii’s native forests. It is the most common native tree in the Hawaiian islands. ‘Ōhi‘a lehua is endemic to Hawaii’s six largest islands and grows in a variety of environments, from sea level to over eight thousand feet in elevation, and in diverse ecosystems from bogs to deserts. Its form ranges from short bushy shrubs to one-hundred-foot canopy trees. ‘Ōhi‘a lehua trees are very efficient at capturing water from the air and rainfall and allowing fresh water to slowly seep into the ground to recharge the aquifers and ecosystems from the mountains to the sea. ‘Ōhi‘a lehua forests are estimated to cover over eight hundred thousand acres statewide and are vital to protecting and conserving both Hawaii’s watersheds and native species.

Forests dominated by ‘ōhi‘a lehua are home to at least twenty-two extant species of forest birds, many of which rely on the abundant nectar of the lehua blossoms. Its nectar is the food for many indigenous species, such as the federally endangered ‘akohekohe (crested honeycreeper) and the ‘ōpe‘ape‘a (Hawaiian hoary bat), the State’s only native land animal. Many of Hawaii’s remaining native plants and invertebrates also make their home in ‘ōhi‘a lehua forests.

The legislature also finds that, while the ecological and cultural importance of the ‘ōhi‘a lehua is worthy of recognition and appreciation, the ‘ōhi‘a is under threat, including from diseases such as a fungal pathogen called rapid ‘ōhi‘a death. Rapid ‘ōhi‘a death has already killed over one million ‘ōhi‘a trees on the island of Hawaii. In recognition of the importance of protecting ‘ōhi‘a, new state and federal regulations have been adopted restricting the importation of close relatives of ‘ōhi‘a, plants in the myrtle family, to prevent new strains of ‘ōhi‘a diseases from entering Hawaii. Climate change, other invasive species, and other environmental pressures will no doubt pose additional threats to ‘ōhi‘a lehua in the future.

The purpose of this Act is to designate ‘ōhi‘a lehua as the state endemic tree to recognize its cultural and ecological importance and raise awareness of the critical threats the plant species is currently facing, with the hope that it will lead to effective conservation and growth of healthy ‘ōhi‘a forests across the Hawaiian islands.

SECTION 2. Chapter 5, Hawaii Revised Statutes, is amended by adding a new section to be appropriately designated and to read as follows:

“§5- State endemic tree. ‘Ōhi‘a lehua (*Metrosideros polymorpha*) is adopted, established, and designated as the official endemic tree of the State.”

SECTION 3. New statutory material is underscored.¹

SECTION 4. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2022.

(Approved May 24, 2022.)

Note

1. Edited pursuant to HRS §23G-16.5.