

<http://www.hawaiiislandjournal.com/2006/0909e.html>

Accessed and copied 10/3/06

Invading Paradise
While Hawai'i twiddles its thumbs, New Zealand gets serious
by Joan Conrow

Hawai'i's airports and harbors are ticking time bombs - and we're not talking about the kind that do predictable stuff, like blowing up.

This catastrophe in the making is not that simple. The threats are multi-faceted and guaranteed to strike without warning, singly or en masse. The lethal agents are tiny - easily disguised and transported, but not so easily detected - hiding in seemingly innocuous places: the standing water on container ships and bilges of luxury liners; the potted plants and barefoot trees of the nursery trade; the landing gear and cabins of jets; the pallets and parcels bearing everything from everyplace to this remotest spot on Earth.

Viruses, malarial mosquitoes, biting flies, fire ants, poisonous weeds, snakes, funguses, rusts, scales and molds could quickly plunge this paradise of the Pacific into a living hell.

Welcome to the brave new world of biosecurity. It looks beyond the homeland to the far more critical biosphere, which, provides the services needed to support life on the planet.

Paula Warren is an expert on the subject, and when she's not at home New Zealand, she's traveling the world advising countries on how they can do biosecurity better. She recently spent two weeks in Hawai'i at the invitation of the Hawaii Conservation Alliance, and met the folks charged with keeping the bio-baddies at bay.

"The advantage of being an outsider is I can say things perhaps they would be reluctant to say," said Warren, principal policy analyst for New Zealand's Dept. of Conservation, which is responsible for protected areas and species. "But doing something about it, that has to come from inside. I struggle to understand American politics and bureaucracy."

Although Warren was aware of the differences between the New Zealand biosecurity system (which is close to the ideal) and the American system (which is not), she offered her observations in the cheerful, polite, understated Kiwi way.

There is room for improvement," she began.

How much room?

Well, Hawai'i catches about one percent of the stuff it's trying to keep out. New Zealand, on the other hand, nails 95 percent. Even Chile and the Galapagos Islands are more vigilant than the Aloha State.

"A lot of the elements of a good biosecurity system are here, but they're fragmented across lots of different agencies," Warren explained. "Whether it's fixable or not is another question. But I'm certainly not getting the sense that it's hopeless.... What I'm finding among the people who work on this is a high desire to cooperate more effectively and a willingness to find ways to work outside their existing mandate. Within each agency, I found lots of enthusiastic people basically making the best of a bad situation, dealing with a lack of resources, legal authority, technology." Overall, she observed, "Hawai'i is probably spending enough on biosecurity. But it's not being spent in the right places. It's just being spent reactively."

For instance, \$50 million is spent each year on termite damage and control. "Wouldn't it be nice if that money was used on prevention or eradication?" she asked. "Instead, it's used on suffering the consequences."

Warren also noticed a lot of no-brainer prevention measures are missing in the Islands, although she was far too professional to use such a term. Instead, she provided an example: Because New

Zealand wants to keep out mesquito-borne malaria, "You can't bring in wet things, like tires, and standing water can't enter."

Hawai'i, on the other hand, has no such rules.

Nor could you deliberately import anything into New Zealand that would displace native species.

In Hawai'i, invasive species may be the number one environmental threat, contributing to the state's dubious distinction as the world's endangered species capital.

The Kiwis' way of doing things sometimes seems the exact opposite of the American approach.

In New Zealand, for instance, conservation groups "are essentially piggybacking" on strict environmental protection efforts driven by business, tourism and agricultural interests, as well as the health ministry, because they recognize that alien pests and diseases are a drain on the nation's economy.

"In the end, it's the economic groups in New Zealand that have created the biosecurity system," Warren said.

By comparison (and these are not Warren's observations) U.S. environmental policy is largely determined by special interest groups, enforced through lawsuits brought by conservationists, then undermined by anti-green politicians.

"Litigation is not a big part of the New Zealand mentality," Warren said. "[The public] encourages the agencies to do something, [and] pressures them to take steps to change or review the system. There's very strong scrutiny of what the agencies are doing."

In New Zealand, the armed forces assist with marine mammal surveys, fisheries enforcement and invasive weed control. They are required to abide by all environmental laws, rather than seeking exemptions to national environmental laws, as the U.S. military was wont to do. Warren observed that "Pearl Harbor is the dirtiest piece of water in the state when it comes to invasive species."

"The military can be a positive as well as a negative," Warren noted. "It's a matter of accepting that biosecurity is as large an issue to public safety as terrorism, and I don't think your government understands that."

Personally, Warren didn't see much difference in dying from a suicide bomb blast or from a malarial mosquito bite. "In the end, if you're dead, you're dead."

Warren was surprised to discover in Hawai'i "there's no way to stop the military from transporting things across the state because they bound by federal, not state, laws."

Those turf battles weren't waged in New Zealand, which has a central system of government and where Biosecurity Ministry oversaw everything related to health, conservation, agriculture and biological resources, Warren explained. "And then there are a number of coordinating mechanisms to make sure they're acting on behalf of everyone."

The next layer of authority lay at the regional level, which deals with localized pests, individual landowners and private farms.

"Under our system, it's quite clear to see who is accountable for what," she said.

Standing in stark contrast was Hawai'i's system, which Warren characterized as "fragmented and poorly coordinated." She added, "Frequently, agencies aren't able to easily get together and decide how to handle pests."

In New Zealand, she noted, the course of action was clear. "We get something in, we eradicate it. If eradication is not feasible, we try to contain, then control it, to protect other parts of the system"

And New Zealand workers have the authority to carry out their plan of attack, she said. They can confiscate goods, force persons to assist their efforts, prevent vehicle movement and go on private land to deal with a biosecurity threat.

"We have our own frustrations, but the sense we're moving forward is much stronger," Warren observed. "In New Zealand, the momentum is within the system. In Hawai'i, it's mostly built by individuals working against the system to get around the problems. So you lose it if that person changes jobs, or retires."

That was a concern to Warren.

"A lot of the people I've been talking to in Hawaii are not that young. It's time to be identifying and mentoring the future leaders. It's a risk that new enthusiastic people will give up because

they get sick of dealing of dealing with the bureaucracy. And you can't really afford to have that happen when you have a system that's very dependent on people, rather than processes."

While in the Islands, Warren met with more than a dozen groups and agencies involved in conservation, inspection and quarantine work - the federal and state departments of agriculture, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, state Department of Land and Natural Resources, Maui County environmental services office, The Nature Conservancy and Bishop Museum among them - and still barely scratched the surface.

"There are so many issues that more people are getting involved, which in a way is good," Warren noted. "But the problem is, now there are more and more agencies working in this fragmented jigsaw model.... There doesn't seem to be the ability to look at the big picture and see what needs to be done."

That was where Warren, with her expertise and outsider status, came in.

So what was her prescription for bringing Hawaii's ailing biosecurity system into some semblance of good health?

"I'm going to be making some recommendations on improvement, but at a fairly general level because I don't understand the finer points of your system," she said. "And I also think there's some very good things here that need to be cherished and expanded on."

Warren gave high marks to the state's invasive species committee program, with its task forces on each island coordinating with various groups and agencies to prioritize and then eradicate targeted invasive species.

"And everyone recognizes interisland quarantine is needed," she added.

That led to another sticky issue, the Superferry, which is expected to increase the movement of goods and vehicles between islands. The company's plan for handling inspections has not been fully disclosed, and Warren said it appears there's inadequate space for an inspection system at the crowded harbors where the ferries will dock.

She also noted that New Zealand still has not resolved all the inspection and quarantine issues associated with its own the rail ferry system, which allows railroad cars, as well as people and motor vehicles, to pass freely between the North and South Islands.

Still, Warren pointed out, Maui had done a good job of keeping out pests at its expanded airport, even though many people were worried that direct overseas flights would bring more alien species to the island. "The example at Maui shows you can do something if you put your mind to it."

Overall, Warren said, "the basic elements of the system are sitting there, waiting to be plugged in, and there's a lot of enthusiasm among individuals. I truly think the system will improve because people want it to.

"But there's a real risk of lots of serious losses in the meantime," she warned. "Often it's the major losses that make people say, 'oh my God, we've got to do something.' But by that time, unfortunately, it's often too late."