Community divided over feral animal eradication effort

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It has been a problem for more than a century.

Feral animals — mainly cattle, deer, goats and pigs — have wrecked havoc with the forest in the Kahikinui uplands, endangering a watershed vital to the region.

That animal problem is now contributing to the deep divide that has split the tiny homestead community on the slopes of Haleakala.

When state Department of Hawaiian Home Lands beneficiaries in the mid-1990s formed Ka Ohana o Kahikinui, the association that eventually would oversee the kuleana homestead DHHL created in 1999, they made restoring the health of the forest a top priority.

It worked with two beneficiary-led nonprofits to carry out a restoration plan that included tackling the problem with the ungulates, the hoofed mammals.

But the homestead association recently decided a change was needed.

It recommended last year that DHHL give KIA Hawaii, a Big Island company with ungulate experience there, access to Kahikinui to deal with the animals. The department awarded KIA a right-of-entry permit in February 2018.

Kaleo Cullen, president of the association, said the expertise of KIA was needed to address the problem, including its ability to remove far more animals than what was being done historically.

But some lessees involved with the prior efforts have criticized the change, saying among other things that they were shut out of the decision-making process. They also questioned bringing in a for-profit company to do what had been a community-based task since the 1990s.

"It wasn't about how you're going to make money," said Walter Kanamu, one of the original Kahikinui lessees and president of Living Indigenous Forest Ecosystems, a nonprofit that for roughly 20 years worked with another nonprofit on the forest restoration and ungulate eradication project. "It was about how you're going to take care of the land."

Kawika Davidson, another original lessee who was involved in the prior ungulate program, said the new one is being done on a more commercial scale, generating large piles of carcasses that are not rendered as efficiently as before, creating unsightly waste.

"There wasn't this gross, obscene mess," he said. "I'm offended that we called an outside company to take care of resources when we have our own people who can do it in the community."

Blossom Feiteira, who was a Ka Ohana board member until resigning last month, said KIA was brought in because the forest condition had deteriorated and the ungulate population tripled under the nonprofit's watch.

"They had 20 years to do that work," she said. "They failed."

Critics of the new arrangement said the prior effort was hindered because a project to enclose the roughly 4,500 acres of forest never was completed.

Fencing is considered critical to protecting the forest and eradicating the ungulates, but the project won't be completed until next year, according to DHHL.

Feiteira defended the way the carcasses have been handled in the recent harvests.

Leaving the remains in the wild to decompose and be eaten by other animals has been a standard practice for generations, she said. "It's perfectly allowable."

DHHL said there are no rules governing the rendering or disposal of carcasses not intended for commercial use. "DHHL continues to support the independence of Kahikinui homesteaders in managing the resources of the area as part of their kuleana in the reforestation efforts," spokesman Cedric Duarte wrote in an email to the Honolulu Star-Advertiser.

Jake Muise of KIA similarly defended his company's involvement in the eradication program.

"Although we are a for-profit company, we have and continue to volunteer in Kahikinui at a substantial financial loss and have donated all of our time and equipment over the past two years," he said in a statement.

During the last four community harvests, Muise added, over 1,000 volunteers from homestead associations across Maui have successfully processed 134 cows and taken home over 55,000 pounds of beef.