



## STAND FREE

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### Kunoa Cattle Company is on a mission to keep Hawai'i's cattle in Hawai'i

Nearly 225 years ago, the first small herd of cattle arrived in Hawai'i. A gift to King Kamehameha from Captain George Vancouver, the protected cattle flourished. By the mid-1800s, nearly 25,000 cows and bulls roamed free. Hawai'i paniolo (cowboys) were trained by Mexican-Spanish vaqueros to raise cattle, and today nearly 1 million acres of land are devoted to ranching in the state, preserving vast tracts of open space.

Prior to the early 1990s, 90 percent of the beef raised in Hawai'i was finished, processed and consumed locally. Due to economic pressures that forced closure of local feedlots, nearly three quarters of Hawai'i's cattle are now exported to the U.S. mainland for finishing and processing. According to figures from the Hawaii Beef Industry Council, state beef production is down to 5.5 million pounds, or just over 6 percent of the total beef consumed each year in Hawai'i.

This system has had a wide-ranging impact on Hawai'i's environment, economy, food quality and animal welfare, and ranchers are working together to find sustainable solutions to keep more cattle in Hawai'i. Kunoa (meaning "stand free") is one of 10 businesses accepted into the first-ever cohort program Mana Up, a newly launched product accelerator that helps scale Hawai'i retail and value-added food products for the global market.

"We are working to improve not only our supply of local beef and capacity to process it but also the way those cattle are raised," says Robert Farias, a third-generation Hawai'i rancher who founded Kunoa in 2014 with Jack Beuttell. Farias oversees nearly 2,000 head of cattle across 4,000 acres of ranchland on Kaua'i and O'ahu.

Following World War II, an overabundance of inexpensive fertilizers and grains made a feedlot finishing model attractive to ranchers throughout the U.S., including those in Hawai'i, resulting in a shift away from grassland grazing. After many decades, the rising cost of importing grains led to the collapse

Hawai'i's dairy and pork industries. Cattle ranchers turned to their most economically viable alternative—selling calves to the mainland for finishing and processing—to survive.

“The markets are now reverting to the pre-industrialized model of both raising and finishing cattle on vegetative forages rather than grains,” Beuttell says. “This practice is much less resource intensive than feedlot beef, whose prices are artificially low due to federal subsidies of the cash crop and petroleum industries. Our goal is to help consumers understand their options and that livestock, if managed properly, can be a healthful component of our diet and a regenerative force for the land.”

The challenge is integrating agricultural production practices in ways that are ecologically virtuous and soil building, Beuttell says. This includes cover cropping, intercropping, no-till drilling, integrated pest management and crop buffering. Renewable energy technologies such as solar, wind, hydroponics and waste-heat capture, as well as improved logistical systems for distributing product, are also being integrated by ranchers. On the consumer side, increased awareness around food waste—estimated to be between 30 percent and 40 percent of the U.S. food supply—can mitigate increasing pressure on agricultural resources.

“We hold a systems view of the challenges in Hawai'i's meat supply chain,” Beuttell says. “To increase self-sufficiency and ultimately regenerate landscapes, we need to look at everything from genetics, feedstocks, grazing management, transportation and manufacturing, to consumer education and engagement. We can't expect that surgically addressing one aspect of the food system will solve the whole set of challenges.”

Kunoa inherited a solar array on its USDA-inspected O'ahu harvest and processing facility, which it purchased in 2016. The company also completed extensive upgrades to promote energy efficiency, worker safety and animal welfare and is in the accreditation period with the Savory Institute, a nonprofit organization that promotes the restoration of the world's grasslands through holistic management.

But mainland competition is fierce. Four companies control approximately 80 percent of the U.S. beef market, and standards vary around the use of language such as “grass-fed,” which is used to describe cattle that have been fed grass pellets in conventional feedlots. Plus, one mainland packing house can produce as much meat in a day as Kunoa does in a year. Those economies of scale are a massive advantage for the largest companies.

The difference for many Hawai'i consumers and abroad boils down to what they know about their food. “There is an emerging sensitivity to terroir in food—the way soils, forages, climate and other factors shape the flavor of your meal,” Beuttell says. “When you develop an appreciation for that nuance in food, and you combine it with a more intimate understanding of who raised it and how it was handled on its way to your table, food takes on a more meaningful role in our lives.”

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—Jack Beuttell, co-founder of Kunoa Cattle Company

