



AG NOTES

September 2025 Newsletter

SPOTLIGHT ON TEO'S FARM IN WAHIAWĀ

With **Teo Soukhaseum** and her husband **Sengouthit Sounthone** being one of the first state Agribusiness Development Corporation licensees leasing 35 acres of ag land in Wahiawā, their farming business initially concentrated on ethnic produce to fill a niche market.

Seven years later, their ag operation on the ADC property has greatly expanded. Young avocado trees once shoulder high are now 15-20 feet tall, producing butter avocado variety highly in demand. Other trees growing papaya, bananas, mangoes and other fruit line the property.

The family first began raising crops in the Kahuku area on the North Shore, but relocated to Central O'ahu to ADC's Galbraith property just north of Wahiawā. Teo says the shorter distance to deliver their goods into town and having a more reliable water supply from ADC's recently-built reservoirs were two major reasons for the move.

Just as importantly, ADC's 35-year lease provides the family business a long-term commitment that would allow their operation to thrive, even during challenging times like the recent pandemic.



Starting Out Small, Branching Out Since Then



When the two began their farming operation, the couple made a business decision to focus on the niche ethnic market instead of competing against bigger farmers on more traditional forms of produce.

Arriving in Hawai'i in 2004, Teo never farmed while growing up in Laos, but knew when she got to the islands that she wanted to grow crops to tailor to certain ethnic markets. With many of her initial customers being of Filipino, Laotian, and Thai background, the couple's initial crop inventory included bitter melon, dragon fruit, okra, taro, long squash, wing bean and long bean. Much of the crops raised back then were sold at farmer's markets or shipped to the continental U.S.

Since we last covered Teo and Sengouthit in 2023, the family ag operation has branched out to more traditional crops such as papayas, mangoes, bananas, tomatoes, avocados, guava and bamboo shoots.

Business is now steady enough that the couple sells their produce daily at the City Square Shopping Center marketplace in Kalihi under the business name TST Farm.

The couple's business plan, however, remains the same: Grow a variety of crops that doesn't rely solely on one staple in the event there is some sort of setback such as lack of customer demand. Through hard work and perseverance, Teo and Sengouthit's ag operation has come a long way and continues to grow.

Quick Facts: TST Farm

Location:	Wahiawā, O'ahu
Acreage:	35 acres
Operating on ADC Property Since:	2018
Types of Crops Grown:	Papayas, mangoes, bananas, tomatoes, guava, bamboo and avocados. Ethnic produce includes dragon fruit, okra, taro, bitter melon, and Filipino eggplant.



MOVING FORWARD: ADC BOARD HEARS FROM HAWAI'I'S AGRICULTURAL LEADERS

The Agribusiness Development Corporation (ADC) carries a clear mandate and responsibility as a cornerstone of Hawai'i's agricultural transformation — building the water, land, and infrastructure systems needed to support farmers, strengthen local food supply chains, and create long-term resilience. That mission was front and center at the ADC Board of Directors' September 18 meeting, where farmers, entrepreneurs, educators, and industry leaders shared their perspectives on how Hawai'i can move agriculture forward.

"ADC's role is to collaborate with farmers, value-added entrepreneurs, educators, industry, government, and the community to build the backbone — strategic land purchases, water, and infrastructure throughout the state," said **ADC Chair Jayson Watts**. "The challenges ahead are significant, but so is our shared resolve. We know Hawai'i's agricultural future cannot be built in silos. By working together, we can create steady markets, secure our water, and build the facilities farmers need to succeed. Collectively, we can strengthen Hawai'i's food security, steward our lands, and build resilience that lasts for generations."

Supporting Farmers at the Core

Brian Miyamoto, Executive Director, Hawai'i Farm Bureau, emphasized the urgent need to strengthen Hawai'i's farmer base. He pointed to the sobering loss of more than 750 farms statewide between 2017 and 2022, a decline from 7,328 to 6,569. Without farmers, he warned, infrastructure alone cannot deliver food security.

"ADC must ensure that our farmers are engaged, prepared and ready to utilize these facilities," Miyamoto said. "This alignment is vital. Together, we can help secure Hawai'i's agriculture future. Plain and simple."

Miyamoto added that the Farm Bureau wants to connect its mission directly to ADC's: "How do we connect ADC's mission to the Farm Bureau's mission? We have a common goal in this room of expanding local food production and ag production, and strengthening Hawai'i's farming base."

He praised ADC's investments in projects like the Wahiawā Central Kitchen, small animal slaughterhouse, egg-cracking facility, and high-pressure processing machine, but reminded the board that throughput and farmer readiness will determine their success.

Regional Kitchens as Game Changers

Denise Yamaguchi, Executive Director, Hawai'i Agricultural Foundation, spoke about the scale and potential of the Wahiawā regional kitchen and the statewide model.

"The regional kitchen model is the real hope for Hawai'i's agriculture," Yamaguchi said. "ADC is the lever that will make or break this opportunity. With your support on land, infrastructure, farmer capacity, and market coordination, we can ensure that when the first regional kitchen doors open in 2027, our farmers are ready and our kids well fed with Hawaii-grown food."

She noted that the Central O'ahu DOE Regional Kitchen will cost between \$28 and \$64 million, be located on ADC-owned land in Whitmore Village, and serve as a regional hub supporting farm-to-school goals. Working with Hawai'i and Kapi'olani Community College's Culinary Institute of the Pacific, the project will also help shape menus and cafeteria worker training. The facility is expected to produce more than 20,000 meals a day at launch, scaling up to more than 60,000 daily when fully built.

Building a Secure Food Network

Dexter Kishida, Food Security & Biosecurity Manager, Hawai'i Department of Transportation, described how bottlenecks at ports, limited shipping schedules, and inadequate cold storage infrastructure threaten Hawai'i's ability to move food efficiently and securely.

"DOT looks to build a resilient and efficient and secure ag transportation network," Kishida said. He explained that too often products spoil in less-than-container-load shipments waiting at ports without reliable refrigeration. He urged investment in shared logistics hubs and cold-chain facilities to prevent loss and reduce costs, and stressed the need for more cold food storage near airports and harbors. He also highlighted how expanded inter-island shipping and air cargo frequencies are essential to reduce dependency on imports and strengthen disaster preparedness.

ADC's ability to invest in land and infrastructure, Kishida added, makes it a natural partner. "ADC's powers to own land, develop facilities, and convene private partners means you can help us solve these chokepoints that DOT alone cannot fix," he noted.

Water as a Lifeline

Daniel Nellis, Dole Food Company, underscored the significance of the Wahiawā Irrigation System, which Dole is gifting to the State under Act 218 (2023).

"Over 50 farms are currently relying on the WIS for water, and 5 billion gallons of ag water is delivered annually," Nellis said. He emphasized that the system, anchored by Lake Wilson, has no backup water source. Without it, agriculture across Central O'ahu would collapse. He explained how the system historically served more than 15,000 acres and produced tens of millions in farm goods.

"This transfer is not a sale — it is a gift — and it is essential to sustaining Central O'ahu agriculture," he said.

He also noted that Act 218 directs the State to acquire the WIS and provide funds to repair and maintain the system, including major upgrades to the dam spillway. "ADC's stewardship will be crucial," he added. "This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to secure the backbone of O'ahu agriculture for farmers today and for generations to come."



Scaling Up Value-Added Products

Meli James, Co-Founder of Mana Up, described how infrastructure, such as the Wahiawā Value-Added Center and high-pressure processing (HPP) machine is opening new markets.

“We can have all the greatest ideas in the world, but sometimes we absolutely need the equipment, to be able to take companies to the next level.”

James explained that Hawai‘i’s entrepreneurs often have the creativity and products, but lack access to equipment, shelf-life extension, and global distribution. The HPP machine, she noted, is a critical example — making it possible for products like fresh juices, sauces, and proteins to meet export standards and reach new markets.

“ADC’s role is to remove barriers,” she said. “By building facilities no single company could afford, you’re enabling dozens of entrepreneurs to grow, export, and create jobs here in Hawai‘i.”



Retail Demand Driving Supply

Lauren Zirbel, President, Hawai‘i Food Industry Association, highlighted strong consumer demand for local food — if supply can keep up.

“The takeaway is simple, when families can afford local, they buy it, and when they buy it, retailers stock more, and when retailers stock more, farmers grow more,” she said.

Zirbel pointed to the success of DA BUX, which doubled SNAP shoppers’ purchasing power for local produce and drove nearly \$5 million in local food sales in 2023 alone. Zirbel also noted that industry trends show growing demand for Hawai‘i-grown food products.

“ADC’s investments in cold storage, food hubs, and processing centers are critical to ensuring retailers can depend on a steady pipeline of Hawai‘i-grown food,” she explained. “These projects create the confidence and reliability that allow local food to expand across supermarket shelves.”

Institutional Markets as Anchors

En Young, Director of Sustainable Industry Development at Kamehameha Schools, described how institutional procurement can reshape Hawai‘i’s agricultural economy when done at scale.

“Over the last 5 years, we’ve taken ourselves from the low 20s to about 53% local,” Young said. He explained how forward contracting and guaranteed sales have given farmers the confidence to expand, invest in equipment, and hire more workers. Kamehameha Schools, for example, has piloted pre-purchasing poi and bananas to give growers upfront capital.

Young also emphasized ADC’s role in advancing the Food and Product Innovation Network and the expansion of HPP. He described the positive impact of purchasing and consuming more local food in Kamehameha Schools cafeterias, noting that ADC’s collaboration with DOE on the Wahiawā Central Kitchen presents an opportunity to institutionalize this model statewide.

“If farmers know they have a reliable buyer, they can scale up with confidence,” he said. “That’s the bridge Hawai‘i agriculture has been waiting for.”

Looking Ahead

From water to logistics, from value-added products to institutional demand, each perspective reinforced the same conclusion: Hawai‘i cannot achieve food security in silos. ADC’s role is to provide the foundation, while its partners bring expertise, markets, and innovation. Collectively, they are moving Hawai‘i toward a more resilient and sustainable agricultural future.



NEXT ADC BOARD MEETING TO BE HELD ON MAUI

For the first time in the agency’s history, the Agribusiness Development Corporation’s board of directors will hold its next monthly meeting on the island of Maui on Thursday, October 16, 2025. The board meeting will be held at 10 a.m. at the University of Hawai’i Maui College’s Pilina Event Center, 310 W. Ka’ahumanu Avenue.

This will be the first time ADC has conducted a Board meeting on the Valley Isle, reflecting the Corporation’s responsibility to prepare and execute a statewide agribusiness plan that transitions former plantation lands, strengthens diversified agriculture, invests in irrigation systems, and delivers economic, environmental, and community benefits across Hawai’i. Maui residents are welcome to attend and provide input at this meeting, with both in-person and virtual options being offered.

ADC is completing its statewide strategic plan and setting clear priorities for the next 1, 5, and 10 years. This includes identifying agricultural lands for acquisition, strengthening diversified agriculture on former plantation lands, and investing in infrastructure that delivers economic, environmental, and community benefits. Earlier this summer, ADC’s Board traveled to Kaua’i to gather public input, with Hawai’i Island scheduled for November.

ADC Chair Jayson Watts said the Maui meeting underscores the urgency of this work: “Local food security is bigger than any one agency — it takes all of us. Farmers, educators, food industry leaders, and community partners are collaborating with ADC to shape the future of Hawai’i agriculture. It will take coordinated action — from infrastructure investment and farmer support, to education, innovation, and market development — to move local agriculture forward and create a stronger, more resilient agricultural future for Hawai’i.”

At the Maui meeting, the Board will invite public testimony and input on:

- Strategic land acquisition opportunities.
- Infrastructure investments for farmers, including shared cold storage, warehouse facilities, processing capacity, and aggregation hubs to reduce costs and improve market access.
- Building the next phase of Hawai’i’s agribusiness value-added ecosystem. The Legislature has tasked ADC with conducting stakeholder research and strategic planning to expand food manufacturing and processing capacity throughout the state. The vision is to create facilities that take graduates of UH Maui College’s Food Innovation Center and other entrepreneurial training programs to the next level — moving beyond classroom learning and small-batch prototypes into commercial-scale production. This is the role of the planned Entrepreneur Product Manufacturing Facility (EPMF) in Wahiawā, designed as part of a broader O’ahu Food Hub that also incorporates Wahiawā Value-Added, Leeward Community College’s partnerships, and the High Pressure Processing (HPP) facility.

How to Share Input Now

Email: dbedt.adc@hawaii.gov

Phone: (808) 586-0186

Public Testimony at ADC Meeting

Public testimony will be welcome in-person and in writing. Instructions, deadlines, and livestream details will be provided once the agenda is finalized, and an official Sunshine Law notice will be posted separately. For more information on ADC meeting dates/times and agendas, go to dbedt.hawaii.gov/adc/meetings.



VISITING MAUI COUNTY: ADC AND STATE SENATE VIEW FUTURE OF AG ON VALLEY ISLE

Earlier this month, the Senate Ways and Means Committee visited Lāna’i to receive updates on economic development and sustainability efforts from the Department of Business, Economic Development, and Tourism (DBEDT) and the Agribusiness Development Corporation (ADC).

Committee members were first guided through the work of Pūlama Lāna’i, a nonprofit creating solutions for a sustainable future through cultural preservation and building economic opportunities for Lāna’i.

“The Senate’s visit demonstrates that food, housing, and workforce are the cornerstones of sustainability and economic opportunity,” said **ADC Board Chairperson Jayson Watts**. “As ADC explores statewide expansion, we are committed to building the infrastructure and innovation needed for rural communities and families to succeed.”

“The work on Lāna’i highlights how rural communities can thrive when economic opportunities and affordable housing are integrated rather than separated. DBEDT holds critical levers that can be used to support rural communities by connecting food, housing, tourism and workforce opportunities,” said **DBEDT Deputy Director Dane Wicker**.

“Today’s visit to Lāna’i shows our deep commitment to supporting sustainable growth in our rural communities,” said **Senator Lynn DeCoite** (D 7 - Hāna, East and Upcountry Maui, Moloka’i, Lāna’i, Kaho’olawe and Molokini), Chair of the Senate Committee on Economic Development and Tourism. “The presentations from DBEDT, ADC, and Pūlama Lāna’i highlight the incredible work being done to preserve Lāna’i’s heritage while creating economic opportunities for the future.”

Information and photos courtesy of the [Hawai’i State Senate](#).

IN MEMORIAM: FORMER ADC BOARD CHAIR
SANDI KATO-KLUTKE

ADC is saddened to learn of the passing of **former Agribusiness Development Corporation chairperson and Kauaʻi board member Sandi Kato-Klutke**, a passionate leader of the local ag community.



Kato-Klutke, passed away on September 12 at the age of 82, according to her family. Kato-Klutke served on the ADC board of directors as its Kauaʻi representative from 2013 to 2021, and as ADC board chair from 2019 to 2021.

The longtime Kauaʻi resident was strongly dedicated to the development of local ag and food production, also serving as a board member of the Kauaʻi County Farm Bureau, as well as on the Kauaʻi Chamber of Commerce’s Ag Subcommittee. During her retirement, Sandi continued helping Kauaʻi’s ag community by increasing sustainability in agriculture through internships for young farmers.

“During her time on the ADC board, former chair and member Kato-Klutke was influential in pushing forward ADC’s mission of food sustainability,” said **ADC executive director Wendy Gady**. “I had the wonderful opportunity to talk with Sandi on Kauaʻi recently and learned how she was quite passionate for ADC and local ag in general. We are grateful for all of Sandi’s contributions to the local ag industry, and our condolences go out to Sandi’s family at this time.” A public Celebration of Life service will be held at a later date.



LONGTIME WAIĀHOLE WATER SYSTEM WORKER RETIRES

John Bautista, whose invaluable expertise and experience helped to operate and maintain the Waiāhole Irrigation System for over 35 years, officially retired from the state last month.

For 36 years – 26 of them as a state employee – Bautista was responsible for the operation and maintenance of the 25-mile irrigation system that transports water from Windward Oʻahu to Central Oʻahu for irrigational use. ADC in 1999 purchased the Waiāhole Irrigation System, which plays an essential role in supporting agriculture on Oʻahu, particularly in Central and Leeward regions where water availability is a significant constraint. By delivering a reliable source of irrigation water, the system sustains local farming operations, promotes diversified agriculture, and contributes to Hawaiʻi’s efforts to achieve food security and reduce dependence on imported goods.

We extend our deepest appreciation to John whose 36 years of dedicated service to the Waiāhole Irrigation System has been instrumental in sustaining Hawaiʻi’s agricultural legacy. His enthusiasm, unwavering commitment, institutional knowledge, and hands-on stewardship have ensured that this vital system continues to support generations of farmers and strengthen our local food security.

“We are profoundly grateful for John’s years of public service,” said ADC executive director Wendy Gady.

Wishing you the best on your retirement, John!



ADC IN THE NEWS

Check out a recent story in Hawaiʻi Business Magazine in which ADC executive director Wendy Gady talks about the future of local ag!

Hawaiʻi Business Magazine: [Hawaiʻi Primed To Revive Agriculture](#)

