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OHA prepares to assume management of Waimea Valley

(Honolulu, Hawai'i) - The Office of Hawaiian Affairs filed papers this week to form a limited liability corporation – Hi'ilei Aloha LLC -- as part of preparations to assume management of Waimea Valley on the North Shore of O'ahu. Hi'ilei Aloha means to carry, care for, and nurture lovingly.

“This historic and landmark action by the Office of Hawaiian Affairs is an essential step to help assure the preservation of the cultural and natural resources of this ahupua'a,” OHA Board of Trustees Chairperson Haunani Apoliona said. “OHA has taken decisive steps to protect Waimea Valley and Wao Kele O Puna through acquisition and we recognize we must strengthen the capacity to be a responsible steward of the 'āina. Mahalo to Audubon for its effort these past few years. We look forward to charting a successful course forward.”

OHA Administrator Clyde Nāmu'o said that the Board of Trustees agreed, based on staff analysis, that the limited liability corporation model was the best option to responsibly manage and operate Waimea Valley while protecting OHA trust assets.

“While we were open to looking nationally for another entity to follow Audubon, we ultimately place our trust in the local community and our people as the best folks to properly steward this valley. Creating Hi'ilei Aloha allows us to be responsive to community concerns, continue Audubon's strong programs, and have an entity to manage Waimea that will have a clear and unwavering focus on Waimea Valley's future,” Nāmu'o said. “We believe that going down this path is in the best interest of Waimea Valley and in the best interest of OHA and our beneficiaries.”

OHA and the Audubon are continuing negotiations on a transitional lease with the goal of turning operations over to the subsidiary of Hi'ilei Aloha in February 2008.

Beyond taking over operations, a key task for Hi‘ilei Aloha will be to renew the community-based master planning process for the valley.

“We want to make sure to look at this place as an entire ahupua‘a,” Nāmu‘o said. Using the “Waimea Falls Park Proposed Master Plan” created by the City Waimea Falls Park Advisory Committee in 2001 as a key reference point, Hi‘ilei Aloha will try to work with stakeholders to identify a course of action to pursue over the next two to five years.

To assist in setting up operations at Waimea Valley, Hi‘ilei Aloha will bring on Gary Gill as project manager on Monday, with the intention he will become the Executive Director for Waimea.

Gill has been a member and Chairman of the Honolulu City Council, Deputy Director for Environmental Health at the State Department of Health and Director of the State Office of Environmental Quality Control.

From 2004 – 2006, Gill served as program coordinator with the nonprofit Kōkua Kalihi Valley Community Health Clinic where he conceived, organized and implemented projects with the Active Living by Design program. Those projects included the creation of the 100-acre Kalihi Valley Nature Park, which occupies state land that has ancient Hawaiian agricultural plots and was once the site of a hula retreat for women.

“One of the goals of the Kalihi Valley Nature Park was to bring the land back to its cultural origins,” Gill said. “I believe with the backing of OHA and the thoughtful participation of the community, Waimea’s best days are ahead.”

Gill was among those who met with Waimea Valley park employees this morning to tell them of OHA’s plans for operating the ahupua‘a.

OHA obtained title to the approximately 1,800-acre ahupua‘a in 2006 after city, state, federal and private agencies pooled resources to purchase the valley from developer Christian Wolffer for \$14 million. OHA contributed \$3.9 million toward the purchase price.