



OHA-2

Building Back Pono: Addressing Socioeconomic Disparities in a Post-COVID-19 Era

This bill seeks to specify that environmental review processes include a specific analysis of whether a proposed action or project will have a significant impact on existing socioeconomic disparities.

Hawai‘i’s environmental review law establishes a system of environmental review which is designed to ensure that environmental concerns are given appropriate consideration in decisionmaking along with economic and technical considerations. The environmental review process allows other stakeholders, agencies, Native Hawaiians, as well as the general public, to provide input on potential environmental impacts that may be otherwise overlooked.

While the scope of environmental review is appropriately broad – covering impacts on the economic welfare, social welfare, and cultural practices of “the community or the state” – environmental assessments and environmental impact statements developed through the environmental review process often do not include a specific analysis of whether a project or action will exacerbate existing socioeconomic disparities of vulnerable communities and neighborhoods. As a result, projects and actions may be approved without any consideration of whether they will have negative impacts on disenfranchised communities, or whether there may be ways to mitigate such impacts.

Vulnerable communities and neighborhoods that have been historically excluded, and systemically underresourced, result in socioeconomic disparities and are typically in areas with a high Native Hawaiian population. Past projects that have impacted vulnerable communities or widen socioeconomic divides include Keaukaha, Waimānalo Gulch and Kahuku windmill controversies.

As we move forward in rebuilding our economy and mending our social fabric, it is critical that we ensure that our capital and other investments do not exacerbate the socioeconomic divides that have already been further widened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, this measure would seek to specify that environmental review processes include a specific analysis of whether a proposed action or project will have a significant impact on existing socioeconomic disparities.

This bill aims to:

- Ensure that the same communities are not constantly sited for various developments or projects that will likely exacerbate socioeconomic divides.
- Facilitate achieving Hawai‘i State Goals related to environmental justice – climate change, energy, health – with the addition of a “socioeconomic disparities” analysis.





- Improve the environmental review process with the addition of a “socioeconomic disparities” analysis that provides decisionmakers with associative, correlative, and relative considerations as it relates to race, income, educational achievement, occupation, and health.

How does a socioeconomic disparities analysis differ from what is already included in statute with social welfare and economic welfare? What does a socioeconomic disparities analysis look like?

Currently, although some Environmental Assessments (EA) and Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) may include a “socioeconomic impacts” section, the level of analysis varies. Additionally, the analysis does not provide any relational, correlational, or associative reference to give rise to meaningful decisionmaking. By definition, “socioeconomic disparities” calls forth the opportunity to assess a proposed project’s impacts—both positive and adverse impacts—to relevant race, income, educational achievement, occupation, and health factors.

What problem does adding a “socioeconomic disparities” analysis solve?

Adding socioeconomic disparities as part of the EA/EIS provides additional information that decisionmakers should consider with a proposed project in aim of environmental justice. While adding this socioeconomic disparities analysis will not automatically nor solely absolve a community’s vulnerabilities, it will provide decisionmakers with needed additional information to ensure to not exacerbate socioeconomic divides. Simultaneously, this added analysis will provide communities with additional information to provide their input.

