Hundreds Testify on Genetically Engineered Taro Bill

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HAWAI‘I STATE CAPITOL (KHNL) -- Hundreds of people testified at the state Capitol Wednesday, talking about food and science. The House agriculture committee is considering a bill that would put a ten-year moratorium on growing genetically engineered taro.

Scientists say we must do something before our entire taro industry falls victim to invasive species, but some native Hawai‘i ans say changing taro is disrespecting Hawai‘i an culture.

Taro or kalo is considered sacred to Hawai‘i an culture.

"Our taro is part of our life and our history," said Emily Naeole, a Hawai‘i County Councilmember. "We've allowed everyone to come here from different cultures. They bring their gods; they bring their mo‘elelos, their stories. They bring everything of their cultures to Hawai‘i ."

These people are here to help determine the future of taro in Hawai‘i . Scientists say genetic research could help reverse the shrinking taro industry.

"In the time of the ancient Hawai‘i ans, yields of taro were 48,000 pounds per acre, and the average yield today is 11,000 pounds per acre," said Dr. Susan Miyasaka, a researcher with the Department of Tropical Plant and Soil Sciences at the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo. "Maybe part of the reason may be due to declining soil fertility, but probably one of the major reasons is due to invasive pests and diseases such as taro leaf blight."

Dr. Miyasaka was a principle investigator in a research project that studied disease resistant genes in Chinese taro.

"And the gene that has been the most successful in increasing disease resistance, is an oxidized gene from rice," she said. "Basically oxalate is found in taro. Taro is known to be a high oxalate containing plant. And what happens is this gene increase disease resistance to taro leaf blight and some other fungal diseases."

But others say science doesn't belong in the food they eat.
"We're tired of getting stuff stuffed down our throats," said Naeole. "We no like as native people. so, we need to take a stand and voice our opinion and say no. We get played like guinea pigs for so long. We're really tired of all of that."

Scientists say research can help taro thrive once again in Hawai'i.

"With any new technology, there are risks but there are risks also if you do nothing," said Dr. Miyasaka. "And so the risk here is that there are very deadly diseases in the South Pacific. And so if they ever reach Hawai'i, it could mean the end of taro production as we know it today in Hawai'i."

Still, some remain skeptical.

"We really don't know what the true effects will be," said Naeole. "So until something is guaranteed, we no like."

Praying for a solution in this contentious debate.

Lawmakers heard testimony the entire day. They plan to rule on the bill early next week.