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By Andrew Pereira

Funding may run dry for invasive species group

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KANEOHE, Hawaii — A group that helps prevent the spread of coqui frogs and other invasive species on Oahu will be forced to lay off staff if additional funding is not secured by the end of October.

The Oahu Invasive Species Committee helps the state Department of Agriculture stop the spread of alien pests while also educating the public about the threat and harm such creatures pose.

But if additional funding is not secured, the number of experts hunting for critters like the coqui frog will drop dramatically.

"We need about \$200,000 to make it through the rest of the year, and we do not currently have any secured funding for the next fiscal year," said Julia Parish, manager of the OISC.

The Committee needs about \$1.2 million per year to continue current operations, which includes a staff of 13 conducting a variety of field work and public outreach to help control target species such as the miconia plant and coqui frog.

The OISC lobbied the legislature for additional funding, but with other demands such as public worker pay raises and concerns over sequestration looming large over lawmakers, the effort has

failed to produce any dividends.

"I think with all of the responsibilities that they have and the current outlook for the state and federal budget, it is a really difficult time for any organization," Parish told KITV4.

Last September, the OISC conducted an island-wide "listening event," urging residents to use the city's 311 smartphone application to report possible coqui frog locations. Although 12 reports that required further examination turned out to be false, the event was nonetheless considered a success.

"A lot of people mistook the common greenhouse frog for the coqui, and so now they have a better understanding of what a greenhouse frog looks like, and that they're actually more likely to hear a coqui frog than see one."

So far this year, there have been five reports of coqui frogs on Oahu, on two inter-island barges, a cargo plane, at an Alewa Heights home and at a Waimanalo nursery.

"We help the Hawaii Department of Agriculture and their staff respond to these reports," said Lara Reynolds, outreach specialist with the OISC, "whether it's actually going to a location, or just serving as an outlet for information so the public is better educated about what coqui frogs sound like and how to report them."

Coqui infestations have already proven detrimental on the Big Island because of the male frogs' piercing mating call, which at 90 decibels, drives down property values and scares away tourists.

Reynolds says residents should be especially alert for possible coqui "spottings" as nights on Oahu grow warmer, since the tiny frogs mate less frequently in cooler temperatures.

"During the winter months, they actually don't call. So, they would be silent more in the winter time," said Reynolds.

Anyone who believes a coqui frog may be present in an area, is urged to call the state's pest hotline at 643-PEST.

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