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The Community Is Mobilizing Again To Buy Molokai Ranch. Will It Work?

If they succeed, the residents would become the new owners of the seventh-largest landholding in Hawaii.

BY **BRITTANY LYTE** / AUGUST 4, 2022

On development-weary Molokai, where boarded-up resorts, restaurants and theaters recall a foreign investor's abandoned crusade to remodel a moribund pineapple plantation town into a lucrative tourist destination, a decades-old quest to overthrow corporate interests that control a third of the island is gaining new momentum.

The stalemate that followed a bitter tug-of-war between Molokai Ranch and the local community now has residents revisiting an old idea: Why not buy the ranch themselves?

Listed for sale in 2017 by a Singapore-based investment firm, the mostly deserted 55,575-acre estate has in recent years attracted developers hawking plans to farm organic biofuel for export to South Korea or generate wind energy for Oahu. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg reportedly considered buying it while on a Molokai hunting trip.

None of this talk has amounted to action. Meanwhile, assets ranging from a gas station and roads to resorts and an oceanfront golf course hang in a limbo of disrepair.

Community organizers proposing to buy the ranch face tough questions not only about whether an island of 7,400 people with the state's lowest household incomes and highest unemployment can really pull off a $260 million land grab. But what, if the community does succeed, should be done with the vast acreage, which includes 20 miles of coastline, expanses of parched pasture, neglected roads, utility systems and a scarce supply of water.

PF Bentley/Civil Beat/2014

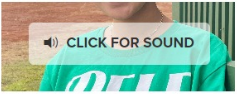
The decaying Sheraton Hotel dining room on the west end of Molokai.

The face of the campaign is Momi Afelin, a 24-year-old Molokai native who works in ancient fishponds while pursuing an Ivy League education in neurology, straddling spheres of ancestral knowledge and modern science.

Afelin represents a changing of the guard on Molokai’s front line of community leaders. Her role as facilitator of regularly held consensus-building meetings, where participants range from skeptical to curious to enthralled, hints at a new approach to activism that moves beyond the island’s reputation for aggressive protests and occupations.

Espousing a vision hatched by Molokai activists in 1998 to return the island’s west end into the control and care of local people, a rising generation of Molokai leaders appear more willing to embrace support from federal loans or outside investors if it enables the community to achieve its goals on its own terms.

“I think that when you have that much land that people don’t have access to there’s a huge disconnection that affects you in every way — your health, your physical well-being, your



Kawanaʻao DeKneef
Student

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Momi Afelin
Program manager at Sustainable Molokai

CLICK FOR SOUND

Gabriel Kaahookano
Security guard at Kepuhi Beach Resort

Few, if any, decisions have been made. At meetings promoted on Instagram and door-to-door with fliers, ideas range from reforesting the denuded slopes of Maunaloa and reopening the shuttered Kaluakoi Hotel to generating fresh opportunities for economic stability through investment in renewable energy.

By improving the cost and quality of housing, Maunaloa families driven out of the town could return home to work toward these goals or start their own businesses. The higher-elevation region might also be an ideal place for coastal residents to relocate as the inevitable consequences of climate change threaten to submerge many of their properties sometime this century.

The planned annexation is partly inspired by a wave of successful global efforts to repatriate lands of cultural and environmental significance back to Indigenous people or other former owners. One example is Scotland's Isle of Eigg, where a trust led by residents has turned around the island's economic and ecological trajectory following a community buyout in 1997.

"I feel hopeful," said Molokai fisherman Kelson "Mac" Poepoe. "We cannot be dependent on outside people supporting us or taking care of our needs. We can do that ourselves."

Maui Mayor Michael Victorino said he supports the community's efforts to buy the ranch and has been watching the process closely. But he notes that managing so much land would be a big job for the Molokai people.

"It's an ambitious goal, but not impossible," the mayor said. "I stand ready to do what I can to help."

In the past, the community tried to compel the state government to condemn the ranch property. A second attempt to enact legislation to exercise eminent domain died in the 2019 Legislature. A funding drive nearly 15 years ago to raise $200 million to buy the ranch also failed.

Cory Lum/Civil Beat/2021

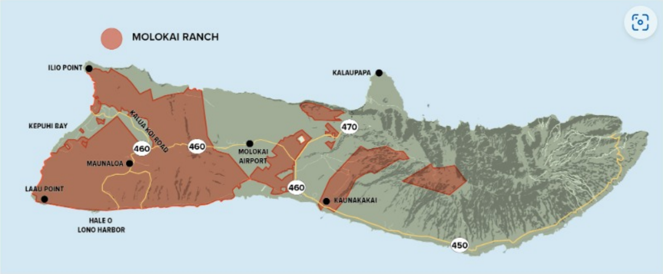
Red dirt runoff on the west side of Molokai.

“What’s different this time around is we are the generation that went away and came back with degrees, experience and a drive to take what our kupuna worked on and bring it to the finish line,” said Maui County Council Vice Chairwoman Keani Rawlins-Fernandez, a Molokai native whose great grandfather was a paniolo on the ranch.

A desire to approach the planning process carefully, inclusively and openly is countered only by a pervasive feeling of being under the gun.

Walter Ritte, a longtime anti-development activist, said he’s crossing his fingers that a billionaire or some new offshore investor doesn’t buy the ranch before the community assembles the investors and vision required to establish an acquisition plan that’s not only feasible but stands to advance the economic and cultural vitality of Molokai’s future generations.

“Somebody bought most of Lanai,” Ritte said. “They’re buying big chunks on Maui, huge chunks on Kauai. So we’re really nervous about who’s going to buy these lands if we don’t.”



Critics and cynics express doubt that the community can pull off what would be one of the largest land buy-back acquisitions anywhere in the world. Also among the naysayers are ranch employees who worry their livelihoods could be derailed.

Rob Stephenson, a west end resident who credits the ranch for keeping up with the maintenance of roads and legacy water systems, said he harbors no ill will toward the ranch. Nelson Rapanot, a Molokai-born hunting outfitter, underscores the fact that whoever buys the ranch will inherit the problem of a water supply shortage so dire that anyone would be hard pressed to realize economic or environmental improvements.

"There are developers with deep, deep pockets that cannot develop the place because there's no water, so what makes you think the community is going to be able to come together to improve the property?" Rapanot said. "It's good to dream, but sometimes you've got to take a look at reality."

A History Of Animosity

Molokai Ranch used to be the island's biggest employer. But after residents rejected the company's plans to build 200 luxury homes at Laau Point, the ranch shut down its high-end lodge, glamping resort, the island's only movie theater, a restaurant, a general store and the only gas station on the west side.

The sudden closure of ranch operations in 2008 put 120 people out of work. The island's unemployment rate shot up from 6.2% in 2007 to 13.7% in 2009.

Brittany Lyte/Civil Beat/2022

A remnant of Molokai Ranch’s defunct Kaluakoi Hotel, shuttered since 2001.

Citing millions of dollars in lost revenue, the ranch threatened to halt the water and sewage utilities that serve 1,200 west end residents and businesses. But a judge ruled the ranch was legally responsible to maintain continuity of service to avoid a public health crisis.

“You can ask the question, ‘Why do you hate the ranch?’ and people will give you a lot of answers, but for me the more important question is, ‘Why do you love this land?’” said Karen Holt, executive director of Molokai Community Service Council. “This is not an island with a lot of fear, but I want to emphasize that I believe that’s due to love.”

A century of overgrazing, deforestation and loss of native plants has made Molokai’s west end susceptible to extreme erosion such that, during heavy rainfall, it turns the coastline blood red with sediment washed down from parched earth. Mud pollution clogs ancient fishponds and kills coral reefs pivotal to the perpetuation of Molokai’s proud subsistence culture.

Water diverted to feed ranch operations long left streams dry elsewhere on the island, undermining the aquifer and cultural practices to gather fish, plants and limu or seaweed.

An exploding deer population, coupled with periods of devastating drought, is pushing thousands of starving animals into neighborhoods where, desperate for water and food, they devour backyard gardens and crop fields — another threat to the island’s self-sufficient lifestyle. The poor health of the island’s deer also threatens a vital source of protein for Molokai people.

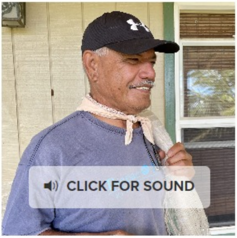
Fencing and “no trespassing” signs to stop residents from accessing certain beaches and forests has also fed controversy over beach access rights and good environmental stewardship.

CLICK FOR SOUND

Timmy Leong
Retired contractor

CLICK FOR SOUND

Malia Akutagawa
Hawaiian studies professor



Kelson 'Mac' Poepoe
Fisherman

Faraway forces have controlled the west end's economic destiny since 1986, when a foreign investment company bought Molokai Ranch from the Cooke family, who lived on the island while operating a cattle ranch and leasing vast acreage for pineapple cultivation. The Cookes had purchased the land, which amounts to the entire Kaluakoi ahupuaa, the traditional land division, in 1908 from Charles Reed Bishop, husband of Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop and founder of First Hawaiian Bank.

Conflict over land management plans proffered by the ranch intensified under corporate ownership as agricultural pursuits faded to make way for a new focus on real estate development.

Some residents praised the company for bringing life to their struggling hometown. But others viewed efforts by offshore financiers to remodel Maunaloa with shiny new facilities as a ploy to transform a community of deeply rooted families into a tourist attraction.

Cory Lum/Civil Beat/2021

A dead axis deer was in an open field along Maunaloa Highway during a period of drought.

Community opposition thwarted the construction of a proposed bedroom community for the Honolulu elite, complete with an airport. Molokai residents were not, however, successful in stopping the ranch from razing dozens of historic plantation homes in Maunaloa.

When the ranch demolished their homes to make way for improved housing, many multigenerational Maunaloa families moved out of town.

“They took the soul of our town,” said Gabriel Kaahookano, 40, a fourth-generation Maunaloa resident and former ranch employee who said he’s spent his life witnessing the town’s community spirit erode. “If you ask me, they tried to destroy us.”

Ola i Ka Wai
Water is Life
SAVE our RIVERS
Let the RIVERS FLOW

Nathan Eagle/Civil Beat/2022

Signs next to a dry Kawela Stream on the south shore of Molokai.

Endlessly at odds, the ranch and Molokai residents forged an unlikely partnership in the late 1990s to build a comprehensive vision for the west end’s future. It included the creation of a community land trust to steward 26,000 acres of land dedicated for conservation — something that could help the residents achieve their desire to bring Molokai Ranch lands under community control to resolve environmental problems caused by poor land management.

In exchange for the proposed land gift, Molokai Ranch would build luxury vacation homes on a deserted coastline. The ranch claimed the development of Laau Point on the island's southwestern tip was necessary to fund another critical component of the plan: the reopening of the abandoned 150-room Kaluakoi Hotel, and with it the promise of work on an island starved for job opportunities.

The proposition divided the community.

> ▶ "It's like driving on the road at night, your headlights can only go so far, but you know there's more road ahead."
>
> *- Malia Akutagawa, Hawaiian studies professor*

On a sparsely populated island, the hundred or so jobs that it proposed to create by reviving the hotel could have shifted the economic fate of untold families.

And the land donation could have put Molokai residents in a position to address the environmental concerns that they'd complained the ranch had long neglected.

But the Laau Point project proved to be a dealbreaker.

In 2008, Molokai Ranch abruptly shuttered its operations and declared that protesters, who waged a fierce, multiyear battle against the housing project, had won.

The cost of victory has been heavy. The land use battle tore apart neighbors and families. West end residents continue to confront economic insecurity and what they view as neglect of the area's natural resources.

As for the mounting effort to buy the ranch, onlookers and contributors alike are grappling with the question of how realistic a buyout really could be, or if it's just a lot of talk again.

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