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Only 25 pct. of laid off Molokai pine workers seen willing to relocate

By Charles Turner
Advertiser Labor Writer

About 25 percent of Molokai's unemployed pineapple workers have shown a willingness to relocate — if they can get jobs on other islands — but most of them want to stay on the Friendly Isle.

That was one of the highlights of a special report, "A Profile of Displaced Pineapple Workers on Molokai," prepared by two assistant specialists in community development at the University of Hawaii.

Authors Richard L. Bowen and David L. Foster prepared the report for the Molokai Task Force, which was reactivated by Maui Mayor Hannibal Tavares after Del Monte Corp. announced a year ago that it was shutting down its pineapple operations on Molokai.

All but 60 of the firm's 150 field workers have been laid off and the remainder are not expected to retain their jobs beyond next year. They are being kept on to harvest the remaining fresh fruit on 3,000 acres.

The Bowen-Foster report, using survey methods which also were employed at Puna Sugar Co., another phased-out agriculture operation, showed "a strong sense of attachment to Molokai" by the Del Monte workers.

Those who indicated a preference or willingness to move from Molokai were asked about the destinations they were considering," the report said.

The responses, which varied by age group, showed that while nearly three-fourths of the workers wanted to remain on Molokai, about 25 percent of the younger farm hands were willing to leave. However, they still wanted to work somewhere in Hawaii, the report said.

"Given the interests and skills of the workers in agriculture and tourism-related occupations and the limited number of jobs on Molokai, an active program to find related job opportunities on other islands and to provide relocation assistance should be considered," the report said.

Among the older workers, 20 were considering leaving the state — with two-thirds of them opting for the Philippines.

The report said job opportunities on Molokai, as identified by the Molokai Task Force, were limited to tourism, corn research operations and aquaculture. The tourism jobs were contingent upon hotel occupancy picking up, the corn jobs available only if planting acreage were expanded and aquaculture jobs unavailable until a sea-farm operation is completed.

Meantime, the survey showed that more than half of those who responded to questionnaires were willing to begin retraining programs.

The report also noted that the largest age group among the pineapple workers is 50-59, "too young to retire and with too few years left in the labor force to easily relocate or begin a new career."

"Unless an outside entrepreneur and capital can be persuaded to bring in a large-scale operation, it is unlikely that a sizable number of jobs will be created in other agricultural areas on Molokai in the short run," the report said.

And it warned that the Del Monte pineapple workers aren't the only ones affected by the phasing out. It noted that suppliers of goods and services to the pineapple industry "will lose an important source of income."

"The demands for the limited public and private human service programs will be increased as well," the authors said.