

# Hawaiian Orchid Growers Fight APHIS Rule

*Debbie Hamrick*

The Hawaiian Orchid Growers Association (HOGA) plans to challenge an USDA APHIS' regulation that was to take effect June 4, allowing phalaenopsis orchids grown in sphagnum moss or other approved media to be imported into the US from Taiwan. HOGA's 144 members represent more than \$23 million in production value—about 26% of all Hawaiian floriculture production.

Can the Hawaiian growers realistically expect to stop APHIS? "Yes, absolutely," says Glen Barfield, of The OrchidWorks, Hakalau, Hawaii, and representative for HOGA. "They used bad science; they blew off information."

To mitigate the risks associated with importing plants in media, APHIS regulations state that greenhouses must be screened with 0.66 mm screening to exclude pests. However, there's concern among Hawaii's growers who've traveled to Taiwan to observe orchid production that the Taiwanese growers won't follow the regulations, especially in regards to producing crops in screened greenhouses for their entire production cycle.

## Taiwan Banking on Orchids

Total orchid production in Taiwan is currently about \$72 million in value—roughly 23% of the country's floricultural production value. Phalaenopsis are the most important orchid, taking up about 65% of Taiwan's orchid exports. Taiwan's pot phalaenopsis market is valued at about \$51 million and 35.7 million units.

It's well known that the Taiwanese government is looking to replace sugar and other commodity agricultural crops dominated by developing nations with high value agricultural production such as orchids. The Taiwan Orchid Plantation, an ambitious undertaking near the southern city of Tainan, is proof of the government's commitment to diversifying Taiwan's agricultural base. There, the government is helping to establish an "industrial park" for phalaenopsis young plant production on 480 acres of land owned by Taiwan Sugar Corporation. By the end of 2004, government investments in the park are expected to top \$22 to \$25 million. Growers will be able lease a greenhouse or borrow low interest government funds to construct their own production facilities. The goal of Taiwan Orchid Plantation is to produce 250 million phalaenopsis in the next five years.—*Lena Fenton and Debbie Hamrick*

The thinking goes that screened greenhouses aren't suitable for orchid production due to poor airflow and resulting higher production temperatures. "You see a lot of commercial greenhouses already 'sort of set up' to meet APHIS regulations with screens and double door entries," says one Hawaii grower who visited Taiwan earlier this year. He points out that many of them used poly-lock type systems, which "are easy to install and easy to remove." The concern among Hawaiian growers is that the situation an inspector sees within the 30 days prior to shipment may

not be the situation that existed during the entire production cycle of the crop.

Hawaii's island ecology is fragile, and growers are also concerned because the new federal law would supercede state law, which requires imports from within the 30th parallels to be quarantined for 60 days. Pests that could come in may affect more than just orchids in Hawaii, because both locations have tropical climates.

In addition to arguing that the Taiwanese industry will be unwilling or unable to mitigate the pest risks associated with bringing in phalaenopsis in media, the Hawaiian growers say APHIS hasn't performed a valid economic impact of how small American businesses will be impacted. For example, says Glen, "APHIS only estimates that Taiwan will import 10 containers per year, but no one would ask for a rule change for such a low volume."

Currently, Taiwan exports some \$9.4 million in bare root phalaenopsis per year to the US. As reference, according to the 2003 USDA Floriculture Crops Summary, American growers with at least \$100,000 in sales produced 15.6 million potted orchids of all types, valued at \$121 million wholesale.

Taiwan's main destination market, Japan, has seen stagnating or declining demand, forcing Taiwan to turn to other markets, says Glen. "It is totally government subsidized and that wasn't addressed [in the APHIS Risk Assessment] at all," he points out. "They look at it for the long term, and we are clearly the best market place. They are losing Japan. They had to create another market, and we are it."

HOGA also points out that the main entity in the Taiwan orchid market, Taiwan Sugar Corporation, is government owned, yet USDA-APHIS relies on phytosanitary inspectors from the Taiwanese government to carry out the inspections and certification program. "We will rely on Taiwanese government inspectors to inspect their own government. Why would you trust anyone in that situation?" Glen asks. "A reasonable farmer would never ask the fox to guard the henhouse."

HOGA has been fighting APHIS on allowing orchids in media into the US since Taiwan first petitioned in 1997. As Glen points out, very few of Hawaii's growers would be directly affected by loss of market. Why bother? "It's the first shoe in the door. If phalaenopsis go away, then someone has created a blueprint for oncidium and dendrobium, and eventually they will get to our crops."

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