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Informed Action Editorial

During my involvement in the Pre-AP Participation in Democracy class at Mililani High School this semester, I took part in the YES Futures project. This project is one that encourages students to become active in their community and government via studying an environmental issue. Based on my experiences and research during this project, I can assess that the Hawai'i State Government has tried and failed to promote the traditional American value of 'the common good.'

I studied the freshwater of Hawaii for my YES Futures project. Water is life in the Hawaiian ecosystem; all organisms depend on it, including native plants, animals, and humans. Everyone depends on the watershed, or ahupua'a, for life; it carries hundreds of billions of gallons of water from the clouds to the mountains to the land to the ocean. "Watersheds are places, as geographer John Wesley Powell put it, 'within which all living things are inextricably linked by their common water course and where, as humans settled, simple logic demands that they become part of a community'" (Hawaii Statewide Forest Assessment and Strategies). Healthy water practices carry many benefits for Hawaii's economy as well as ecology; however, watershed quality has severely decreased over the last several decades. Human activity, including introduced species and pollution, is destroying Hawaii's precious water supply and will continue to do so if we do not take action.

The American government derives its foundation from the ancient system of classical republicanism, in which the purpose of a government is to promote and work for the 'common good.' The government's authority to act comes from the Constitution, the basic law of our country. The assent of the people also contributes to their authority, for the people elect their representatives, who must provide for the 'common good' of their constituents and the country.

In recent years, the American and Hawaiian governments have come to be much more conscientious about the environment and sustainability. The United States Legislature passed the Clean Water Act in 1972 (amended 1977): the objective of the Clean Water Act is to "restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the Nation's waters" (Federal Water Pollution Control Act). The Coastal Nonpoint Pollution Control Program is a comprehensive program intended to

manage water quality impacts from urban areas.. This program focuses on pollution prevention rather than cleaning up already contaminated water. Hawaii has “several conditions remaining” until it can be fully approved as safe (The Coastal Nonpoint Pollution Program).

When dealing with environmental issues, the government is influenced by basic values such as commitment to civil needs, preservation of the environment, and need for money. The first two of these three values are generally good and can lead to positive change in our community. The last, however, is the most important and the most influential. The government’s actions are dictated by how much money and resources are available, not what needs to be done. This is why I believe the government is inefficiently handling environmental problems, such as the issue of contamination of freshwater.

Some people may be thinking, “Well, we can’t do anything without money, so isn’t the government acting with prudence?” I acknowledge this point, but the government actually has a lot of money--it is just in the wrong place. The federal government spent *818.7 billion* dollars on defense in fiscal year 2013, but only *7.7 billion* on water management (usgovernmentspending.com)! Wouldn’t you agree that the survival of our planet and of our most valuable resource, water, is more important than fighting with other countries?

To summarize, I have learned many things during my participation in the YES Futures project where I studied freshwater in Hawai’i, one of which is the values by which the government is influenced when acting with respect to the environment. These values are in the wrong order of priority; money should not be the most important for if we didn’t have a healthy planet to live on, money wouldn’t matter. This needs to change, and you can be a part of this change; I encourage you to write to your representative or senator about this pressing issue. Thank you.