



Agriculture

How A Wellness Company Is Saving Sandalwood On The Big Island

A former ranch in South Kona is being transformed from a grassland back to a native sandalwood forest by a Utah-based essential oils and aromatherapy company.

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By Paula Dobbyn   / May 23, 2022

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A major reforestation effort is taking place on the Big Island's leeward side in the name of sandalwood, a species prized for its warm, woody aroma.

DoTERRA, a Utah-based manufacturer of essential oils, is planting trees at Kealakekua Mountain Reserve, a 9,600-acre property on the western slope of Mauna Loa. The reserve is a former ranch located mauka of Kealakekua Bay, about 20 miles south of Kailua-Kona.



The company purchased the land in 2018 for \$7.3 million with the aim of sourcing its sandalwood on the Big Island and replanting the degraded property with native trees and plants. Under its 10-year management plan, doTERRA only uses dead or dying

sandalwood in its essential oil production and it must keep 75% of the land forested.

Extracted and distilled from plant compounds, essential oils are used in perfumes and aromatherapy, a growing sector of the personal care and wellness industry valued at nearly [\\$19 billion](#) in 2020.

With 4,461 employees, according to a company spokesman, and at least [\\$1.83 billion in annual sales](#) according to an estimate by Dun & Bradstreet, doTERRA is a big player in the industry.



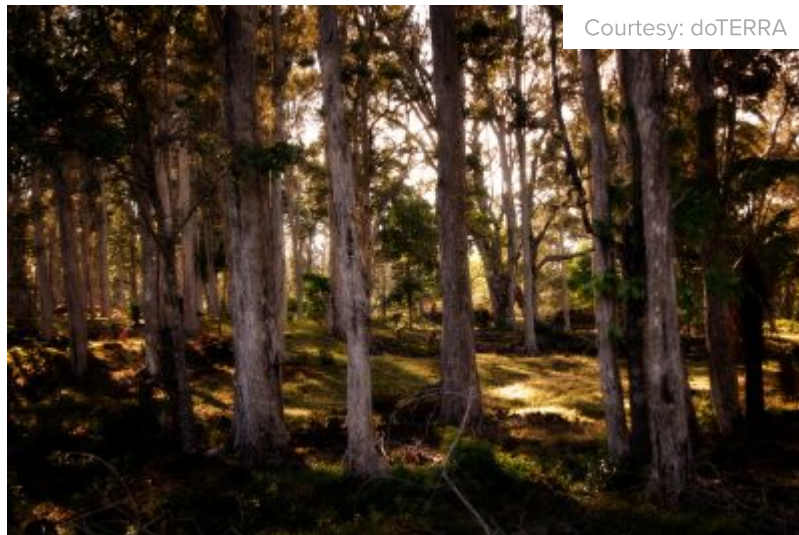
A section of reforestation at Kealakekua Mountain Reserve.

Sandalwood, or iliahi in Hawaiian, is native to the state but the species is not thriving due to a long history of overharvest and threats from grazing animals, rats and wildlife.

Native Hawaiians traditionally used the wood for medicinal purposes, for wood carvings and to add scent to clothing made of bark, [according to published accounts](#). In the 1800s it was heavily logged and sold to China. For several decades, Hawaiian tree harvesters cut large swaths of sandalwood and for many years it was thought that the trees had actually become extinct.

“Sandalwood has had a very difficult past,” said Tim Valentiner, vice president of global strategic sourcing for doTERRA.

After foreign trade of sandalwood wound down, many of the logged forests were converted for cattle ranching, effectively turned into grasslands. That’s what happened at Kealakekua Mountain Reserve, formerly known as Kealakekua Heritage Ranch.



Kealakekua Mountain Reserve is the site of the reforestation project for sandalwood.

After many years of timber extraction followed by decades of ranching and grazing by feral animals, the Kealakekua forest was in tough shape ecologically. Most of the big sandalwood and koa trees were gone along with much of the forest canopy.

Prior to doTERRA’s arrival on the Big Island the state Department of Land and Natural Resources had recognized the natural value of the land. It acquired a conservation easement, permanently protecting it from development through the U.S. Forest Service’s Forest Legacy Program.



Courtesy: doTERRA

Close-up of Hawaiian sandalwood.

Staff with the [Forest Legacy Program](#) identify high-value forests threatened by development. Through a competitive process, forests can become eligible for federal funding through the program if a state agency is willing to enforce sustainable forestry practices. The goal is to provide forest products to local communities, preserve habitat for native birds, and to control soil erosion which can harm water quality and aquatic life.

Before the conservation easement went into effect at Kealakekua Heritage Ranch in 2011, Hawaii County had approved a development plan for the land which would have involved the construction of 500 residential lots and a golf course, [according to the Forest Service](#).

Over the past three years, doTERRA has planted over 300,000 native trees and it intends to plant some 1 million by 2030, said Valentiner.

“That far exceeds what has been done by any private landowner let alone the state government itself,” he said.

The company built a large nursery on the property where it grows saplings and tries to keep tree-killing species and pests from moving in and gobbling up the young trees.

“They are doing a lot of fencing to protect the land from feral pigs and sheep,” said Tanya Rubenstein, a state forester who monitors the mountain



Courtesy: doTERRA

Sandalwood saplings at Kealakekua Mountain Reserve.

reserve. “Their intensive investment in replanting and fencing and the removal of feral ungulates is very impressive.”

Fencing is even more important than replanting when it comes to the survival of sandalwood, said Katie Friday, a Hilo-based Forest Service legacy program manager.



Courtesy: doTERRA

DoTERRA's tree nursery at Kealakekua Mountain Reserve on Hawaii island.

In addition to its reforestation efforts, doTERRA also supports [Hiki Ola](#), a nonprofit that promotes education, environment and cultural awareness through programs it offers at Kealakekua Mountain Reserve.

While essential oil production and reforestation continue on the Big Island, doTERRA has opened a 7,500-square-foot product fulfillment center on Oahu.

The company says it has a growing customer base in Hawaii and fills over 15,000 orders from in-state customers each month. The new product center on Pupuole Street in Waipahu will allow for faster shipping and provide a designated space for customers to pick up their orders, according to doTERRA.

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