

Shrimp beats out bottled water as Hawaii's top edible export

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The reign of water as Hawaii's biggest food or beverage export has come to an end.

A drop in bottled water production combined with a strong increase in shrimp and prawn farming dethroned water as the top edible commodity exported from the state to other countries last year, according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

Bottled water — largely desalinated seawater sold in Japan and promoted as being drawn from thousands of feet below the surface where water is pure and nutrient-rich — had been Hawaii's top edible export since 2005. The industry, however, has been on a decline since peaking in 2007 at a value of \$39 million.

Last year the value of Hawaii water exports slid 17 percent to \$19 million from \$23 million the year before, the Census data show.

Conversely, shrimp and prawn exports surged 48 percent to \$26 million last year from \$18 million the year before to make the seafood Hawaii's biggest food export. Most or all of the shrimp in Hawaii is farmed.

The Natural Energy Laboratory of Hawaii Authority, a technology park with connections to deep, cold ocean water off the Kona Coast of Hawaii island, noted the rise in shrimp exports in a recent announcement and is optimistic that more of what it calls "Blue Tech" projects will come online in the park.

"We are thrilled by the growth in aquaculture sales and increased exports and the very significant contributions from NELHA firms that are leading this surge," Gregory Barbour, NELHA's executive director, said in a statement.

Barbour said an expansion at the park among companies producing shrimp brood stock, which are adult shrimp raised to produce offspring, was responsible for the jump in shrimp exports. These companies send much of their shrimp to Asia, where the animals are used for reproduction.

"Some experts say Hawaii has now become the 'shrimp brood stock capital of the world' and may account for up to 60 percent of total worldwide production," NELHA said in a statement.

David Leong, president of NELHA tenant Shrimp Improvement Systems LLC, said in a statement that technological improvements and strategic alliances have helped the company improve its product year after year and contribute to an expanding global shrimp aquaculture industry.

Besides shrimp, other farm-raised sea animals including fish and crustaceans represented \$6 million in exports last year but did not rank among the 25 biggest Hawaii exports.

The total value of all Hawaii exports last year was \$1.45 billion, up 142 percent from \$598 million the year before. However, most of the exports are considered re-exports, or commodities that are imported to Hawaii and then exported.

For example, the top export from the state last year was airplane and helicopter parts valued at \$303 million. That was up from \$83 million the year before. The next-biggest export last year was petroleum oil at \$292 million, up from \$27 million the year before.

Other top exports from Hawaii include military equipment and explosives, other kinds of oil and scrap metal.

Other foods among Hawaii's 25 biggest exports last year were packaged cocoa valued at \$12 million, papaya valued at \$10 million and coffee valued at \$8 million.

