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Energy

NELHA director sees agency as ‘important partner’ to business community



Riley Saito, executive director of the Natural Energy Laboratory of Hawaii Authority.
NELHA



By [Janis Magin](#) – Editor-in-Chief, Pacific Business News
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Riley Saito recently joined the Natural Energy Laboratory of Hawaii Authority on Hawaii Island as the state agency's new executive director.

NELHA oversees the Hawaii Ocean Science & Technology Park, a business park on 870 acres next to the Ellison Onizuka Kona International Airport at Keahole that is home to 55 businesses that engage in aquaculture, renewable energy and other ocean-based sustainable technologies using the deep seawater pumped in from the ocean. The park has three pipes that bring in ocean water from the deep sea as far as 3,000 feet down, and the warmer surface, that give the companies a range of temperatures to use for their work or research and development.

Saito has a background in renewable energy, policy and hospitality.

After graduating from the [University of Hawaii](#) at Manoa with a business degree in travel industry management, he joined the Hyatt Corp., working at hotels in Waikiki and Dallas before moving to the corporate office in Chicago. When Hyatt was getting ready to open the Hyatt Waikoloa Village, the company sent Saito to Hawaii Island, which has been home since then.

His career with Hyatt started in food and beverage, then took him to information technology and then finance. He joined the Mauna Lani Resort in 1994 as corporate controller in charge of security and maintenance of the 3,200-acre resort and golf course.

His introduction to renewable energy came in 1998, when Mauna Lani installed one of the first commercial solar photovoltaic systems in the nation. He left

hospitality to work with PowerLight Corp., later SunPower Corp., as its senior manager of Hawaii projects.

Prior to joining NELHA, Saito was an energy specialist with Hawaii County and during the Covid-19 pandemic worked to administer funding from the federal government for small businesses. He also ran his own energy consulting business.

How does your background help in your new position?

Overall, it matches perfectly. The charter for NELHA says “The purpose of the Natural Energy Laboratory of Hawaii shall be to facilitate research development, commercialization of natural energy resources, ocean related research, technology and industry in Hawaii to engage in retail, commercial tourism activities that will financially support that research development and commercialization at the Research and Technology Park in Hawaii.” So it’s a blend of things that I’ve done.

What are your plans for NELHA?

I still have so much more to learn before I can say that a direction should be a certain way, because I would require myself to be inclusive of the community in whatever direction, if you want to call it that. I think of it more of a change in behavior than a direction. And the overall change in behavior that I believe is needed is the reduction of importation for how we live, primarily fossil fuel.

How does NELHA fit in with the business community?

I see it as an important partner within the business community. Some of the companies here, like Blue Ocean Mariculture and Cyanotech, have been here more than 20 years and they are active in the Chamber of Commerce, and

they're active with employees – we've got at least 300 local employed people. I've been meeting with the various tenants and getting a sense of use of local employees, and the employee base, and pretty much over 90% are people who live here.

Is there room for more energy at NELHA?

Yes. The energy direction would be to optimize the production of electricity during solar peak, combined with a form of storage which may include batteries.

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