

Executive Summary – Maui–Japan Direct Flight Initiative

Aloha Mai Kākou,

This executive summary is respectfully submitted to outline a community-driven initiative to advance a direct air service connection between Japan and Maui (OGG). The Maui–Japan Direct Flight Initiative directly supports the County of Maui’s recovery and resilience priorities by fostering economic stabilization, workforce retention, and community-centered tourism—while honoring local values.

Purpose and Alignment with County Priorities

The Maui–Japan Direct Flight Initiative advances the County’s recovery goals by:

- Supporting economic recovery and stabilization following COVID-19 and the Lahaina urban fire
- Diversifying visitor markets toward higher-value, lower-impact travel
- Promoting workforce stability and family retention, helping residents remain on Maui
- Advancing community-centered tourism that respects place, culture, and quality of life
- Strengthening long-term resilience through international partnership and innovation

Maui continues to experience economic displacement and out-migration as recovery challenges persist. As observed by Marvin Moniz, OGG Airport Manager, families are leaving the island daily due to a lack of opportunity—an outcome that runs counter to the County’s recovery objectives.

Establishing direct international access from Japan to Kahului Airport presents a practical, near-term opportunity to strengthen Maui’s economy without increasing pressure on housing, infrastructure, or natural resources, while also supporting Friendship City relationships and easier, more meaningful visitation to Maui.

Background and What Has Changed

During a Maui Visitors Bureau (MVB) Board meeting in Q1 2025, it was shared that two international flights were diverted from Daniel K. Inouye International Airport (HNL) to Kahului Airport (OGG). Historically, runway length at OGG was viewed as a limiting factor for international service; however, these diversions demonstrated that modern aircraft operating international routes can safely land at OGG without runway extension.

This operational shift removes a long-standing barrier that constrained prior efforts and presents an opportunity that did not previously exist.

In response, a local working group was formed in June 2025 to explore a path forward grounded in feasibility, community benefit, and long-term resilience. The working group consists of:

- Marvin Moniz, OGG Airport DOT Director
- Tapani Vuori, General Manager, Maui Ocean Center and Board member MVB
- Kawika Freitas, Director, Old Lahaina Lū'au
- Kasper Rasmussen, General Manager, Mana Kai Maui and Board member MVB
- Michael Takamura, Sales Director, Maui Ocean Center

A Travel Industry town hall meeting was held at Maui Ocean Center Sphere Theater in July 2025. Members of HTA, HTJ, MVB, two main Japan wholesalers represented by JTB and HIS, along with Maui Chamber of Commerce, Hawaii Attractions Association, Airlines, Maui Hotel and Lodging Association, Executives and Directors were in attendance. We also initiated communications with a few members of the state senate on tourism, along with initiated discussion with The Honorable Mazie Hirono, United States Senate, and The Honorable Jill Tokuda, United States House of Representatives.

Economic Impact and Market Opportunity

(DBEDT Data; Industry Perspective – Tapani Vuori, General Manager, Maui Ocean Center)

DBEDT data highlights the historical and potential importance of the Japanese visitor market to Maui and clearly illustrates the opportunity cost created by the absence of direct international access.

Historic Scale and Decline

- In 2001, Japanese visitors generated approximately \$312 million in direct spending on Maui, representing the peak of this market.
- During that period, Japanese visitors accounted for over 15% of Maui's total visitor arrivals, despite the requirement to clear immigration and customs in Honolulu.
- By contrast, in 2024, Japanese visitor spending on Maui declined to approximately \$20 million, with Japanese visitors representing less than 1% of Maui's total visitors.
- Statewide Context
- At its peak, Japanese visitors represented over 30% of total statewide arrivals (mid-to-late 1990s).

- In 2024, Japanese visitation statewide recovered only partially, representing approximately 7.6% of total visitors, indicating that Maui is capturing a disproportionately smaller share of the recovering Japan market.

Spending Power and Economic Multiplier

- Japanese visitors consistently demonstrate high per-person spending, with statewide per-person per-trip expenditures historically exceeding \$1,400–\$1,800, significantly above many other visitor segments.
- Secondary economic impacts are estimated at approximately 48% of direct visitor spending, amplifying benefits across retail, agriculture, transportation, cultural institutions, and small businesses.

Implications for Maui Recovery Notably, Maui’s strongest historic performance with Japanese visitation occurred without direct international flights, underscoring the magnitude of unrealized opportunity. A direct Japan–Maui flight corridor would:

- Increase Maui’s share of statewide Japanese visitation
- Restore a high-value, low-impact visitor segment aligned with regenerative tourism goals
- Delivering meaningful economic gains without increasing visitor volume

As noted by Tapani Vuori, the prolonged absence of this market continues to affect attractions, agriculture, cultural organizations, and small businesses that once relied on consistent Japanese visitation.

Limitations of the Current HNL Transfer Model

(Kawika Freitas, Old Lahaina Lū‘au)

Under the current Japan–HNL–Maui routing, visitors must clear immigration, customs, and security in Honolulu, then transfer terminals and undergo re-screening before boarding an interisland flight. These barriers suppress demand, increase travel fatigue, and significantly reduce economic benefit to Maui, undermining recovery efforts.

The Maui–Japan Direct Flight Initiative consists of two primary approaches. The first is to formally establish Kahului Airport (OGG) as an international airport. The second—and preferred—approach is to implement a Japan–to–Maui customs and immigration preclearance system, like the existing Canada–to–Maui preclearance program.

Direct international service to OGG would eliminate these inefficiencies and create a more seamless visitor experience while keeping economic benefit on Maui.

Community, State, and Federal Alignment

In July 2025, the working group convened a broad stakeholder meeting that included County, State, and Federal agencies; airlines; hospitality leaders; and Hawai‘i- and Japan-based tourism partners. The response was overwhelmingly positive, with consensus support to continue advancing this initiative.

Subsequent meetings with FAA, DHS, TSA, CBP, and U.S.–Japan liaison officials—including discussions at the U.S. Embassy in Japan—indicated openness to exploring U.S. Customs pre-clearance and modern biometric solutions. Canadian officials shared successful pre-clearance models and emphasized the importance of coordinated gubernatorial and congressional engagement.

Hawai‘i Tourism Japan and Japanese wholesalers, through MVB, have emphasized that post-pandemic and post-fire conditions present an opportunity to reintroduce Maui to the Japanese market. Group travel, escorted itineraries, and structured visitation patterns align well with Maui’s community needs and infrastructure capacity.

Broader Benefits to the People of Maui / Hawai‘i

Beyond tourism, this initiative supports broader County recovery outcomes by:

- Supporting local jobs, small businesses, and cultural institutions
- Strengthening agriculture, education, and cultural exchange pathways
- Reducing reliance on a single visitor market
- Encouraging longer stays and higher per-visitor value
- Helping local families remain rooted in Maui
- Develop Culture and community understanding, education, and exchanges.
- Bring attention to Made on Maui and Maui Products for e-commerce and export.

In addition, according to U.S. Census data, approximately 23,000 Maui residents are of Japanese ancestry, representing a long-standing cultural, familial, and economic bridge between Maui and Japan. A direct Japan–Maui flight corridor would strengthen people-to-people connections, support family travel and cultural exchange, and reinforce Maui’s historic ties to Japan in a manner that benefits both residents and visitors alike.

Maui County Support: Expressed by Mayor Bissen.

1. Endorse advancement of the Maui–Japan Direct Flight Initiative, including efforts to establish OGG as an international airport and support discussions on U.S./Hawai‘i customs pre-clearance with the Governor and Hawai‘i’s Congressional delegation
2. Mayor Bissen offered to communicate the pre-Clearance efforts with all Island Mayors that will benefit the state of Hawaii. He also offered to help coordinate an internal meeting with Governor Josh Green and the core committee on the Japan Initiative.
3. Encourage intergovernmental coordination consistent with County recovery and resilience priorities
4. Support Maui’s consideration as a pilot location for direct international service and modern clearance solutions, including biometric proof-of-concept opportunities

Background & Current Efforts

Leadership Alignment and Roles

Strong coordination across Hawai‘i leadership is in place:

- Richard Bissen, Mayor of Maui County
Champions the initiative locally, coordinates with county and state leaders, and supports Maui as a pilot location.
- James Tokioka, Director, DBEDT
Leads economic strategy and interagency coordination across state and federal partners. Director Tokioka will take leadership of the initiative and will coordinate efforts with Governor Green.
- Mazie Hirono and Jill Tokuda
Provide federal advocacy, policy support, and alignment with congressional priorities.
- Industry and Community Leaders
Included in the core initiative team: Tapani Vuori, Kawika Freitas, Kasper Rasmusen, and Michael Takamura, who support implementation through market development, economic analysis, and community engagement.

This unified leadership structure ensures alignment across policy, operations, and market readiness.

- A past program (“JL connection”) helped streamline arrivals but ended due to aircraft and scheduling issues
 - Strong support growing from:
 - Hotels
 - Local businesses
 - Some hotels are willing to lower prices to attract Japanese visitors
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Economic Impact

- 2024 Japanese visitor impact:
 - ~\$20M direct spending
 - +48% additional indirect impact
- 2001 comparison:
 - ~\$213M direct spending → shows major decline and opportunity
- Removing Honolulu customs barrier could:
 - Increase visitor numbers significantly
 - Open export opportunities (e.g., agriculture to Japan)

Why Japanese visitors matter:

- High spending
- Respectful travelers
- Low impact on local communities
- Support sustainable tourism

Current gap:

- Maui Ocean Center visits still 17% below pre-COVID levels
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State & Regional Collaboration

- Strong support from:
 - Josh Green
- Governor leads the Western Governors' Association → helps coordinate multiple states
- Plan to:
 - Host a conference with U.S. governors + Japanese officials
 - Share costs of infrastructure
- Multi-state cooperation improves chances of federal approval

Progress:

- Firearms-related federal issue → resolved
- Remaining challenges:
 - Cost
 - Logistics

Maui Readiness (Local Level)

- Cultural training and visitor readiness programs underway
- Hotels offering reduced rates:
 - Fairmont Kea Lani
 - Outrigger Ka'anapali Beach Resort
- Businesses adapting to Japanese visitors:
 - Tajima Ramen
 - Don Quijote

Key point:

- Maui is ready to welcome Japanese tourists again
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Customs & Border Challenges

Main Issues

- High infrastructure cost
 - Staffing and housing for federal officers
 - COVID delayed progress
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Alternatives to Pre-Clearance

- Programs already improving travel:
 - Global Entry
 - Mobile Passport Control

Impact:

- Wait times reduced from hours → ~15–30 minutes
- Easier entry without complex treaties

Federal view:

- Less urgency for pre-clearance due to these improvements
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Next Steps with Federal Government

- Schedule direct discussion with Customs (CBP)
 - Pre-Clearance discussion to ease Immigration and Customs clearance
 - Clarify:
 - Current position
 - Realistic path forward
 - Prepare clear questions and briefing points for:
 - Federal officials
 - State leadership
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Costs & Consulting

- Consulting proposal (Paragon Insights):
 - ~\$250,000 study
 - Purpose:
 - Assess Maui airport needs
 - Conclusion:
 - Some upgrades needed regardless of pre-clearance decision
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Leadership Commitment

- Strong backing from Governor Green
 - Multiple trips to Japan to support tourism recovery
 - State committed to:
 - Exploring all options
 - Reducing travel barriers
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Japan–Hawaii Relationship

- Strong cultural ties:
 - Hula community
 - Ukulele players
- Long-standing tourism relationship

Goal:

- Strengthen cultural + economic connections
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Tourism Strategy

Balanced Approach

- Avoid over-tourism (like 2019 levels)
- Focus on quality visitors over quantity

Why Japan Market Fits

- Less crowding impact
- Higher spending
- Respect for culture and environment

Market Preparation

- Adjust pricing to address “expensive Maui” perception
 - Targeted marketing for Japanese travelers
 - Businesses already adapting
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Communication & Coordination

- Improve alignment across:
 - Federal
 - State
 - Local stakeholders
- Combine efforts into one clear strategy
- Avoid duplication

Key Actions

- Create clear question list for officials
 - Include Governor’s office in follow-ups
 - Hold direct meetings with federal representatives
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Action Items

David Uchiyama

- Share consulting proposal
- Help draft key questions

Caroline Anderson

- Finalize and share strategic plans

Eric Takahata

- Co-develop questions
- Set up meeting with Customs (CBP), TSA, and HLS
- Develop strategies to announce USA Pre-Clearance with Japanese Wholesalers.

James Tokioka

- Coordinate with Governor
- Support multi-state efforts

Tapani Vuori

- Provide economic data
- Engage Maui leadership

Michael Takamura to work with Maui Visitors Bureau and Hawaii Visitors Bureau

- Prepare Maui businesses and marketing for Japanese Guests
 - Help Identify The “Why” for Maui and “What Maui have to offer” as requested by HTJ, H.I.S and JTB.
 - Coordinate with international partners with the support of Hawaii Tourism Japan / Eric Takahata
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Conclusion

This initiative offers a measured, lawful, community-aligned pathway to recover focused not on visitor volume, but on public benefit, economic stability, and keeping Maui families' home. With leadership and coordinated support at the County, State, and Federal levels, the Maui-Japan Direct Flight Initiative can restore a vital economic lifeline while honoring the values that define Maui.

Pre-Clearance Initiative for Japanese Travelers (Maui/Hawai'i)

Bottom Line

- Maui strongly wants Japanese tourism to return
- Pre-clearance could be a major economic boost
- Federal cost and priority remain biggest obstacles
- Maui is prepared and aligned locally
- Next step: clarify federal position and decide path forward

Simple Summary Notes

Goal

- Make travel from Japan to Maui easier and faster
- Allow Japanese visitors to arrive like domestic passengers (no Honolulu customs stop)
- Increase tourism and economic recovery for Maui