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Hawaii News

House leaders reveal new committee chiefs

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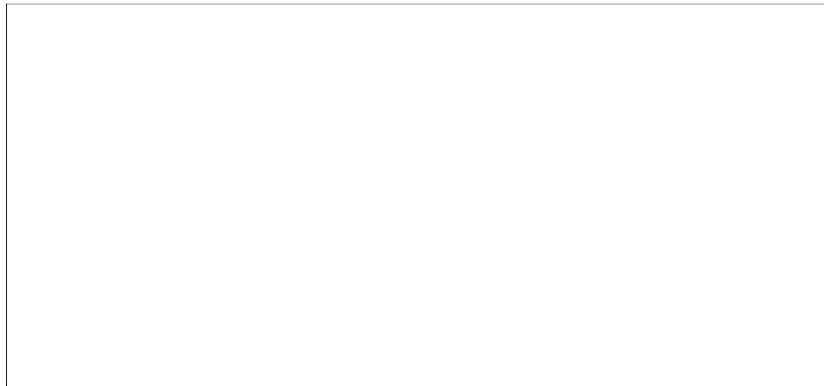
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The leadership of the state House of Representatives announced Tuesday who will head 20 committees that will oversee everything from tourism and transportation to the environment and education when the 2017 legislative session gets underway in January.

Most notably, Rep. Richard Creagan will head the Agriculture Committee, replacing Rep. Clift Tsuji, who died suddenly last week following a heart attack. Rep. Scott Nishimoto will be chairman of the Judiciary Committee, replacing Karl Rhoads, who won a seat in the state Senate earlier this month.

Creagan, a physician and farmer from Hawaii island, is expected to play a key role in whether the Legislature acts to increase regulations on GMOs and related pesticide use. After a federal appeals court ruled earlier this month that the counties don't have the authority to regulate GMOs and pesticides, effectively throwing out three neighbor island county ordinances, anti-GMO activists and supporters of the measures vowed to take the fight to the Legislature.

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Tsuji had helped block past measures targeting Hawaii's biotech industry. Creagan will likely take a more moderate stance, calling his views on the GMO issue "nuanced."

"People are concerned about GMOs and both sides have their points. But there probably are zealots on each side, so there needs to be a middle ground," said Creagan, noting that any legislation should protect health and the environment while also ensuring that farmers can farm.

Creagan noted that there is "nothing intrinsically wrong with GMOs," and that he will likely focus on increasing transparency about pesticide use.

In addition to filling the vacant posts, House leadership also shuffled around some members. Rep. Isaac Choy, who has taken the University of Hawaii to task on issues such as tuition increases and poor management, will no longer head the Higher Education Committee.

"To be honest, the university has a very difficult time standing up to my scrutiny," Choy said.

House Speaker Joe Souki wields authority over committee assignments. The most powerful posts will remain intact for the upcoming session.

Rep. Scott Saiki remains majority leader, and Rep. Sylvia Luke will again preside over the powerful Finance Committee.