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NEIGHBORS

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Agencies planning to rid Lehua of rats, rabbits

Island serves as seabird refuge

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LIHU'E, Kaua'i — State and federal agencies want to rid little Lehua Island of the rats and rabbits that have left it denuded and with limited habitat for seabird nesting.

They propose to poison the rats and shoot or trap the rabbits.

Lehua, which lies less

than a mile off the northern point of Ni'ihau, has a land area of roughly 200 acres.

Like Diamond Head and Molokini Island, it is an old volcanic tuff cone. On maps, it is shaped like a "C," with the points facing north. The Coast Guard maintains a beacon on its highest point, 700 feet above sea level.

Lehua is a state wildlife refuge prized for providing nesting area for seabirds, and 17 species have been spotted there.

It also has small populations of native coastal vegetation and insects. The is-

land's sparse vegetation is believed to have been eaten up by the rabbit and rat populations. In addition to eating seeds, rats also prey on bird eggs and nestlings.

Rabbits may have largely eaten themselves to near starvation. In some years, researchers have seen none, but at other times they have seen a few. Wildlife personnel and fishermen who have approached the island over the years have said the rabbits they do see generally appear malnourished.

It's not known when rats arrived at Lehua, but with rab-

bits, one popular tale is that early European ships dropped rabbits off on many small islands to provide a food source for sailors who might end up shipwrecked there.

A notice in yesterday's Federal Register said the rabbits were believed to have been introduced in the 1930s or earlier — perhaps because when the Coast Guard light was set up in 1931, the crew reported rabbits were numerous.

The agencies propose to use rat poison pellets to eradicate the rats, either aerially or manually scatter-

ing them, or installing them in bait stations. The rabbits would be shot or trapped.

The Register notice said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the state Division of Forestry and Wildlife will prepare an environmental statement on the proposal to restore Lehua's ecosystem. A public hearing on the proposal is scheduled from 7 to 9 p.m. June 9 at the Lihu'e Neighborhood Center on Kaua'i.

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