

NOVEMBER 2023

SITUATION REPORT: LAHAINA FIRES

PREPARED BY: NAFCON USA & HAWAI'I WORKERS CENTER



HAWAI'I WORKERS CENTER
www.hawaiiworkerscenter.org

CONTEXT

The fire that spread on August 8 was exacerbated by conditions that led to a worsened impact for the people of Lahaina.

Officials were warned about the fire risk years ago, yet failed to create adequate plans and foresee the danger. Bushfires started early in the morning of August 8, and were put off by firefighters. Strong winds due to Hurricane Dora caused electric posts to fall, which started fires again and led to the formation of fire balls, creating an inferno in Lahaina.



PC: Tiffany DeMasters

No timely warning was given to residents, as evacuations, road closures, and shelter-in-place advisories occurred more than several hours later. Lahaina residents resorted to taking shelter on rocks by the ocean, as fires worsened later in the afternoon; some residents recall waiting for over eight hours until firefighters were able to rescue them.

Although drought and strong winds contributed to the natural calamity, the fire turned to disaster as a result of a lack of immediate government response and decades of human actions like redirecting water for golf courses and hotels.

The Disaster agency reports that 2,652 buildings and houses were exposed to the fires, 2,142 of which are damaged or turned to ashes with an estimate of \$5.22B capital exposed. About 86% of the buildings exposed are residential, which is around 1,840 houses.

AREA & LIVELIHOOD IMPACT

As of November 15 the current death toll is 100. The youngest victim was 7 years old and the oldest was 97. Several were residents of a low-income senior apartment complex. The current missing peoples list at 7. The estimated displaced population is 9,806.

Some temporary housing programs, such as the American Red Cross Safe Harbor program for relief after a natural disaster, ended at the end of September. Thousands of residents have been temporarily housed in West Maui hotels and AirBnB properties, though many shared that there are no long term plans for housing past October.

Although residents are allowed to return to the remains of their homes, community members are being warned to **“enter at your own risk”** as impacted areas and **surroundings are hazardous with unstable structures, sharp metal objects, and ash with toxic substances.**

Residents were told to wear PPE (suits, protective gloves, goggles and masks)

to watch out for downed power lines and trees, and to avoid moving ash or hazardous debris.

Lahaina’s economy is fueled by tourism. Businesses in Lahaina generated more than \$70M per month in revenue and they employed about 8,500 individuals. Among the destroyed buildings were visitor accommodations and short-term vacation rentals that provided roughly 1,500 rooms.

West Maui supplies more than 10,000 rooms in hotels, timeshares, and vacation rentals - about half of the island’s total visitor accommodation capacity. With about \$270 daily spending per visitor to Maui, the loss of revenue adds up to more than \$13 million per day.

CURRENT GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

U.S. Federal, State, and Local Government Response

Upon declaration of a major disaster on August 10 by President Biden, FEMA was immediately activated to facilitate aid to impacted citizens. Before that, the Hawai'i National Guard was dispatched by the State. Help was limited to U.S. citizens and documented migrants, excluding the Compacts of Free Association (COFA) citizens from the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Republic of Palau, and other undocumented immigrants, including Filipinos.

Later, the Hawai'i State Department of Labor and Industrial Relations (DLIR) opened satellite offices to facilitate Unemployment Insurance (UI) to be made accessible to impacted workers. Disaster Unemployment Assistance (DUA) from the Federal government was also made available to those that are not eligible to UI.

The Hawai'i's Department of Human Services activated D-SNAP, providing much needed short term food assistance benefits to those impacted by this tragedy. D-SNAP is made available to qualified families regardless of immigration status, including COFA citizens and undocumented immigrants.

Effective October 8, visitors will be able to return to West Maui. **While a calibrated restoration of the main economic activity in Lahaina is very important, the situation of housing for the impacted residents, those that lived in the almost 2000 houses burned, should be clear.** The messaging from the County and the State is not still clear on the housing as they are projecting a calibrated opening of tourism in the areas impacted by the fires.



PC: Jae C Hong/AP

CURRENT GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Philippine Government Response

The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) Undersecretary Eduardo de Vega reported zero Filipino casualties several days after the disaster, despite Filipinos making up about 40% of the town's population and a majority of the workers in the tourism industry in Hawai'i.

While most of the Filipinos living in Lahaina are now naturalized Americans, many are still Philippine nationals, including the recently immigrated and undocumented community members.

The Philippine Consulate has conducted outreach in Lahaina. They have provided limited services to impacted Filipinos such as repatriation of victims remains. A major need among Lahaina Filipinos is the need to replace important documents such as passports.

The Consulate continues to charge Lahaina residents fees to replace their passports and other documents such as dual citizenship certificates. In a recent community resource fair in late September, residents had to pay \$150 - \$195 for the replacement of their passport. When asked why the fees are not waived for residents whose passports were destroyed by the fires, the Consulate stated that the request was already made to the head office of DFA but an upfront cash payment still needs to be collected, with the possibility to get reimbursed if and when the waiver is approved.

As of this situation report's date, the Philippine Consulate has indicated that there is no need for additional meetings with Filipino groups in response to meeting requests from the Hawai'i Workers Center (HWC), The Filipino Chambers of Commerce, Hawai'i Filipino Lawyers Associations, and other concerned community members.

PROPOSED RESPONSE FOR NAFCON



Resource fairs spearheaded by civic organizations have gathered the biggest number of Filipinos to get the immediate support they need. However, the need to organize Filipinos for empowerment is critical for their recovery.

NAFCON supports the demand of the Hawai'i Workers Center (HWC) of doing recovery and rehabilitation work the right way – putting people of Lahaina as priority instead of corporate interest. We believe that the key components to disaster response are relief, early rehabilitation, and advocacy. In the immediate, NAFCON will support the conduct of rapid assessment of damages, needs, and capacities and organized people

to people relief delivery operations such as the most recent resource fair.

Our advocacy includes backing HWC's demand that the Emergency Proclamation be extended to provide longer protection from the state as rebuilding is happening and that both short-term housing policy moratorium and long-term affordable housing needs be addressed. Alongside HWC and other community organizations in Hawai'i, NAFCON also calls for the Philippine Consulate General in Honolulu to give assistance to the Filipino community and completely waive the fees for the replacement passport and other important documents during this current humanitarian crisis.

In such devastation, community members regardless of immigration status are very much in need of care by their kababayan.

Join the Lahaina Disaster Response here:

tinyurl.com/BayanihanResponseForLahaina



 nafconusa.org

 [@nafconusa](https://www.instagram.com/nafconusa)

 info@nafconusa.org