

STATEMENT

OF

ROBERT FENTON
REGION NINE REGIONAL ADMINISTRATOR
CHIEF FEDERAL RESPONSE COORDINATOR

FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

BEFORE

THE

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS AND THE FEDERAL
WORKFORCE
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Held in Maui, Hawaii

“Assessing the Federal Government’s Response to the 2023 Maui Wildfires”

Submitted

By

Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20472

September 4, 2024

Chairman Sessions, Representatives Tokuda and Case, and Members of the Committee: My name is Bob Fenton, and I am the Regional Administrator for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in Region Nine. I also serve as the Chief Federal Response Coordinator appointed by President Biden to oversee the federal response from the historic wildfires that swept through Kula and Lahaina in August 2023. Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding FEMA's continued efforts to help communities and individuals rebuild in the aftermath of this tragic event.

During the deadliest wildfire to impact the United States in over a century, flames fueled by high winds devastated communities and destroyed thousands of homes, businesses, and cultural heritage sites across Lahaina. At the same time, dozens of homes were also destroyed by a wildfire in Kula. On the night of the fires, August 8, 2023, FEMA approved three Fire Management Assistance Grants (FMAGs) to bolster local firefighting capacities. Shortly after, FEMA mobilized urban search and rescue capabilities, incident management staff, and other initial responders to provide lifesaving assistance following the Administration's swift approval of a Major Disaster Declaration. More than 400 urban search and rescue personnel and 40 canines from across five states were quickly deployed, and together combed through 1,789 structures and 3,816 vehicles as part of the rescue and remains recovery effort. In total, over 1,000 federal personnel rushed to the island to help survivors, and FEMA shipped approximately 50,000 meals, 141,000 liters of water, 5,000 cots, and 10,000 blankets to Hawaii.

Approximately 4,000 households lost their homes in the wildfires. Locating temporary housing for displaced survivors has been a critical component of the early response and longer-term recovery, especially given the pre-existing housing shortage on Maui. After the fire, the town of Lahaina evacuated over 10,000 people. Approximately 8,000 stayed with family and friends, and nearly 2,000 people stayed in congregate shelters administered by the American Red Cross. By the second week of the incident, the state and county closed all congregate shelters and moved these 2,000 survivors into hotels through the state-run, FEMA-funded Non-Congregate Sheltering (NCS) Program. At the height of NCS, 8,000 survivors were accommodated in hotels, out of Lahaina's pre-fire population of 13,000 people.

Additionally, more than 4,300 households were approved for Housing Assistance through FEMA's Individuals and Households Program (IHP) assistance. As part of IHP, \$34.8 million was provided directly to survivors through financial housing assistance, which helps with initial and continued rental costs. A further \$22.5 million was provided to 6,800 eligible households through the Other Needs Assistance program to help with eligible expenses like funeral assistance, childcare, and transportation.

Together with our federal, state, local, non-profit, and private sector partners, we are committed to ensuring the people of Maui have safe, clean, and affordable housing solutions as they continue on their path to recovery. Following the state's request for Direct Housing Assistance, FEMA worked collaboratively to overcome several unique, Maui-specific challenges to provide temporary housing. Maui's limited infrastructure, lack of water, varied topography, and shortage of available space for temporary housing construction resulted in very few quick and viable solutions. Hawaii's remoteness and housing code requirements also limited the feasibility of delivering the Transportable Temporary Housing Units often used by FEMA after disasters.

Additionally, the affordable housing shortage that existed pre-fire was exacerbated and further restricted survivors' ability to secure their own housing.

To overcome these challenges, FEMA strategized with the Governor and Mayor on the best path forward. A joint decision was made to target short-term vacation rentals due to their abundance and high vacancy rates on Maui following the wildfires. Under the Direct Lease program, FEMA entered into lease agreements with property owners on behalf of eligible disaster survivors and by January 2024, the agency secured approximately 1,300 direct lease units. Monthly rents were negotiated unit-by-unit and were based on what an owner could expect to receive if the unit operated as a short-term vacation rental. To further incentivize participation in FEMA's program, the Mayor instituted a tax incentive for short-term vacation rentals that converted to long term rentals for use by wildfire survivors. To date, FEMA has approved over \$294 million for the Direct Lease Program on Maui and secured leases for up to two years.

FEMA continues to explore and implement additional innovative solutions to secure temporary housing for survivors. For example, FEMA is procuring Alternative Transportable Temporary Housing Units (ATTHUs) and will install them on a group site at Kilohana. Due to the speed and efficiency of debris removal operations FEMA is also coordinating with eligible disaster survivors to place ATTHUs on the private properties of residents who lost their primary homes during the wildfire. Given the uniqueness of each site, we are working closely with our local partners to secure the necessary permits, environmental clearances, and utility connections.

A crucial piece of both the housing mission and overall recovery is carefully removing the debris to allow for the comprehensive reconstruction to continue. The scale of this disaster has required a whole of government response, and FEMA is utilizing the expertise and abilities of over a dozen partner agencies. For example, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency was mission assigned to remove 253 tons of household hazardous materials such as asbestos or lithium-ion batteries, and the U.S. Coast Guard led efforts to remove 98 sunken and destroyed vessels. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) was mission assigned to manage debris removal on eligible private properties in the burn scar, in addition to creating a temporary disposal site before longer term solutions are finalized by the county. To date, over \$1 billion has been obligated for debris removal on Maui. All wildfire debris has been removed from Kula and placed into a permanent debris storage site. FEMA anticipates that all Lahaina wildfire debris will be moved to the temporary disposal site by January 2025.

The post-wildfire cleanup is being done with an eye to public safety and the vigilant monitoring of air, water, and soil quality. FEMA and our partners are also working to ensure that cultural sensitivity and local knowledge is interwoven into every aspect of these efforts. Lahaina was the capital of the historical Hawaiian kingdom, and sites of significant cultural importance were hidden under the ashes of the fire. Cultural experts were relied on to observe operations and advise on every facet of debris removal for each property in Lahaina and Kula. FEMA also ensured that hiring local, Hawaiian owned businesses was a priority amongst our partner agencies, like the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Depending on the project, 70-80% of the workforce for USACE missions were contracted to Hawaiian owned businesses and locals on Maui. This includes the construction of the temporary elementary school, the temporary group housing site, and the entirety of the debris removal missions in Kula and Lahaina. FEMA also

created a Cultural Protocol Task Force at the outset of the disaster to educate deployed staff on Maui about local customs and practices that could be integrated into their work with survivors.

FEMA continues to seek out ways to streamline our processes and ensure that survivors can return to their pre-fire way of life as quickly as possible. And as we rebuild in these communities, we must also ensure that we build back better with more resilient infrastructure and take appropriate steps to reduce future risk. While we will always be ready to respond when disasters occur, we recognize that true success rests in mitigating the worst impacts of disasters before they happen. Developing resilient communities ahead of an incident reduces both the loss of life and economic disruption. In support of these efforts, over \$357.9 million is available to our partners in Hawaii through the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. This mitigation grant provides funding to state, local, tribal, and territorial governments so they can develop hazard mitigation plans and rebuild in a way that reduces the impact of future disasters.

FEMA's U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) is also working to help build resilience in Maui and prepare for future wildfires. In collaboration with DHS Science and Technology, Hawaiian fire chiefs, and state partners, the USFA has deployed 80 wildfire sensors on Maui and across the Hawaiian Islands. These smart sensors, in the second phase of testing, will enhance 'Warnings' and 'Alerts' notifications, enable the deployment of mobile sensors for post burn monitoring, and enable integration testing with mass notification systems and the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). This new sensory technology, utilizing artificial intelligence (AI), is a critical part of an effective wildfire response, providing real-time, accurate information about fires ignition, as early as possible so resources can be quickly deployed and engaged in suppression.

Over one year since these wildfires, FEMA has 210 personnel on the ground in Maui, and our agency is committed to helping our Hawaiian partners until the job is done. As we continue our work together, we're also preparing to open a Joint Recovery Office focused on Maui's long-term recovery. We are actively hiring 129 positions, with the goal of filling these positions with local hires whenever possible, so the local community is helping to lead Maui's recovery for the years to come.

In Maui, as in all disasters, FEMA will continue to be vigilant stewards of taxpayer dollars, and we are careful in our projections of how much funding will be required from the Disaster Relief Fund. However, there are times when the number and intensity of disasters outpaces appropriated funds. We find ourselves in such a moment today. As a result of the dwindling Disaster Relief Fund, on August 7, FEMA implemented Immediate Needs Funding (INF). In implementing INF, we are prioritizing lifesaving and life sustaining disaster responses, and delaying obligations for longer term work. And although we will continue to accept and process project applications for longer term work, FEMA will be unable to obligate funding until the DRF is replenished. However, you have our commitment that FEMA will move quickly to resume obligations paused under INF as soon as the Disaster Relief Fund is replenished.

In closing, I want to extend my deepest condolences to the families of those who lost loved ones or their homes in the wildfires. I would also like to emphasize my gratitude to the first

responders, FEMA personnel, and partner agencies for their adaptability and endurance. Many of them risked their wellbeing during the response and immediate aftermath of the wildfires.

As we look to the challenges and opportunities ahead, we recognize the importance of leveraging and relying upon the relationships we have built with leadership from all levels of state government, county government, non-profit organizations, private sector, and impacted communities. President Biden was clear that this recovery would be led by the local community and its desired vision for the future, and that long term recovery would require a collaborative approach from all of us. So, in collaboration with the authorities, funding, and expertise of our partners in Hawaii and Congress, FEMA looks forward to helping rebuild a more resilient Maui that embodies the voice of the community.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering your questions.