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Hearing on the Federal Government's Response to the 2023 Maui Wildfires

**Before the
Committee on Oversight and Accountability
Subcommittee on Government Operations and the Federal Work Force
U.S. House of Representatives**

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Chairman Sessions and Members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, thank you for inviting me here today and for the opportunity to address your questions.

I want to start by affirming that EPA's mission is to protect human health and the environment. We work hard to ensure that all communities across America have clean air, clean land, and clean water. Under that mission, ensuring the safety of those who have been affected by the devastating 2023 wildfires on Maui, and supporting their recovery, has been a top priority for EPA and for me personally.

On August 8, 2023, winds from Hurricane Dora spread wildfires across Maui, devastating the towns of Kula and Lahaina. Over 3,000 structures were damaged or destroyed, and 101 people tragically lost their lives. On August 10, a Presidential Disaster Declaration was made, and EPA Region 9 personnel were here on the ground within 24 hours to support emergency response efforts.

Since this tragedy struck, I have personally visited Maui multiple times to manage and oversee EPA's work, which has been carried out with the utmost respect for the rich cultural heritage of the affected communities. I have seen firsthand the heartbreaking devastation suffered by these communities, and I have listened to the deeply moving stories of residents who have lost so much. These personal experiences have profoundly affected me and reinforced my commitment to helping these resilient communities recover.

As part of the multi-agency emergency response led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), EPA was tasked with addressing hazardous material removal, providing water infrastructure technical assistance, and offering sustainability advice during the recovery process. Today, I'm here to share updates on our ongoing efforts in this crucial mission, and I'm pleased to be seated beside a few of our federal partners with whom we have worked so well and in such close coordination.

Hazardous Materials Removal

On August 17, 2023, EPA started work on hazardous materials removal, the critical first step of the overall recovery, with assistance from the U.S. Coast Guard, and in coordination with the County of Maui, Hawai'i Department of Health, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. EPA crews removed by hand more than 200 tons of hazardous materials from 1,374 residential and 74 commercial properties. We conducted this removal meticulously, in concert with on-site cultural monitors, to ensure cultural and religious artifacts were preserved. The EPA hazardous materials removal team completed its work — which constituted Phase 1 of the federal response — on December 22, 2023, which was 30 days ahead of schedule and over \$20 million under budget. At the completion of this effort, EPA smoothly transitioned work to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for Phase 2 of the federal recovery.

At the request of the County of Maui, and to protect the health and safety of residents, field crews, and the environment, we also took measures to prevent ash from mobilizing into the air or running off into streams and the ocean. The County of Maui and the Hawai'i Department of Health also requested that EPA set up five air monitoring stations in Lahaina to provide continuous data on fine particulate matter on EPA's AirNow website. As a result, the state can better monitor local air quality and advise residents in the area as needed.

Water Infrastructure Support

The wildfires significantly impacted the Lahaina drinking water and wastewater systems and the Upper Kula drinking water system. That is why, separate from and in addition to the hazardous materials emergency responders, EPA deployed Water Emergency Team members to provide on-the-ground guidance and technical assistance for stormwater, wastewater, and drinking water for the County of Maui.

Starting on January 4, 2024, over the course of seven months, EPA tested drinking water quality in 1,308 lateral service lines that connect water mains to properties with burned structures. If contamination was detected, or if a line was too damaged to be sampled, the line was isolated from the main distribution line and marked for future replacement. EPA also sampled 135 fire hydrants, isolated 589 contaminated laterals, and cleared and inspected 97,749 feet of sewer lines in Lahaina.

Through these efforts, EPA staff helped lift drinking water advisories in Upper Kula, stabilized the local wastewater treatment plant, and assisted in plugging segments of the water infrastructure to prevent ash, saltwater, and groundwater contamination. On July 17, 2024, EPA announced the completion of the drinking water and wastewater emergency response mission in Lahaina, although we continue to actively support Maui County's Departments of Public Works, Environmental Management, and Water Supply.

Recovery and Sustainability

EPA also received a mission assignment from FEMA for a long-term recovery Sustainability Advisor to assist in rebuilding communities and restoring watersheds with the aim of building resilience to future climate change impacts and disasters. Since August 2023, EPA has provided a Sustainability Advisor to the FEMA Interagency Recovery Coordination Team. The Sustainability Advisor continues to collaborate with local and state departments and federal agencies to understand local priorities and identify potential funding sources for long-term recovery.

The Sustainability Advisor has, among other projects, developed two technical assistance contracts for sewer system planning and master drainage planning, assisted FEMA with the Recovery Needs Assessment, supported Maui County in holding neighborhood-specific community planning meetings, assessed cost-effectiveness of water infrastructure projects eligible for FEMA funding, and provided technical review of the state's environmental monitoring reports.

Engaging the Community and Respecting Hawai'i's Cultural Heritage

Our approach to our work in Maui has been deeply rooted in respect for Hawai'i's unique cultural heritage and in compassion for local residents who suffered so much as a result of the wildfires. Through consultation with local Maui cultural leaders, we developed a cultural strategy that has set a new standard for federal disaster response. This included providing cultural sensitivity training to all EPA personnel and contractors on Maui, implementing a code of conduct for our staff, and – most importantly – embedding cultural monitors within our hazardous materials teams. In recognizing the immense cultural significance of Lahaina and Maui, EPA employed cultural advisers and monitors who accompanied teams in the field to help identify cultural and archeological artifacts. Their work helped ensure Lahaina's rich cultural history was preserved as much as possible during EPA's operations.

Throughout the response, EPA staff conducted community outreach efforts across Maui, fielded questions, and – using a variety of languages – provided information to community members about EPA's work in a range of ways, including presenting at weekly public meetings. These advisers also provided critical guidance and feedback to EPA's outreach and communication efforts. We at EPA are dedicated to transparency and open communication. Throughout the entire response and recovery process, EPA has made it a fundamental objective to keep the local community informed about and aware of everything we are doing as well as hear valuable input from the community while we are guests on the island.

Interagency Collaboration

EPA personnel have worked closely with federal, state, and local government partners on response and recovery efforts, and we are thankful for the collaboration, teamwork, and dedication of all our partners at every level of government. As part of the whole-of-government

response and recovery effort led by FEMA, EPA has coordinated with FEMA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), the Hawai`i Department of Health, Maui County, and numerous other federal, state, and local agencies. For example, EPA subject matter experts advised on ash and debris removal and supported USACE-led Phase 2 efforts to remove hazardous materials from residential and commercial properties. This collaborative approach has enabled the multi-agency response to leverage diverse expertise and resources, ensuring a comprehensive and efficient response to the disaster.

Ongoing and Future Work Ahead

EPA remains committed to Maui's long-term recovery, with our personnel supporting ongoing projects and future work. For example, in addition to the Sustainability Advisor mentioned previously, EPA staff are supporting planning and design for the Wahikuli Terrace Subdivision sewerage project, affecting over 230 homes; continuing to provide a Landfill Subject Matter Expert for solid waste planning; and exploring avenues to help residents afford the transition to improved wastewater management systems.

EPA's response to the Maui wildfires reflects our unwavering commitment to our mission to protect human health and the environment; to strong collaboration with our federal, state, and local partners; and to our deep respect for Hawai`i's unique cultural context. I have walked the streets of Lahaina and Kula and have spoken with community leaders. I have witnessed both the devastation as well as the incredible spirit of the Maui community and people of Hawai`i. The stories of loss, resilience, and hope that I have heard from residents have touched me deeply, and they drive our continued efforts.

EPA's response efforts here have been carefully tailored to the needs of the Maui community. We are committed to ensuring the people of Maui have clean water to drink and safe land on which to live and rebuild. EPA will continue to stand with the people of Maui and provide our expertise and resources where we are needed. The incredible strength and spirit of the Maui community inspire us, and their needs guide our work every day as we help rebuild not just infrastructure, but lives and communities.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to your questions.