

**DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
UNITED STATES ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS**

COMPLETE STATEMENT OF

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COMMANDER
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BEFORE

**COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY
SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS AND
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ON

GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS IN LAHAINA, HAWAII

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Chairman Sessions, Ranking Member Mfume, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) response to the August 8, 2023, wildfires in Lahaina, Maui. The Corps has contributed significantly to the recovery effort, working closely with Federal, state, and local partners.

The wildfires that swept across Maui on August 8, 2023, devastated the historic town of Lahaina, as well as several homes in the Kula highlands, a neighborhood in central Maui. There were 102 lives lost, more than 1,550 properties destroyed, and significant damage to public infrastructure, including water and sewer mains, roads, and the harbor. While many of the affected properties were single family homes, others contained one or two additional 'Ohana' homes or accessory dwelling units (ADUs). These housed the workforce, guests, and extended families of the people of West Maui, resulting in a greater impact on the people of Maui than the number of properties affected would suggest.

On August 9, 2023, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) issued an initial mission assignment to the Corps to activate Emergency Support Function #3 (ESF #3), Public Works and Engineering. Under the Stafford Act, the Corps and other Federal agencies work under the direction of FEMA, as provided in the National Response Framework. In its response to the Maui wildfires, FEMA issued 10 mission assignments to the Corps, totaling \$1.15 billion. The primary role of the Corps in this effort has involved temporary power, debris removal, critical public facilities, and temporary housing. Since August 2023, over 1,300 Corps personnel have deployed to Maui supporting USACE fire response.

On August 10, 2023, the Corps quickly mobilized a Temporary Emergency Power Planning and Response Team to restore power to critical infrastructure, including water wells, pump stations, and emergency centers. The deployment of 20 generators was completed by September 29, 2023.

Debris removal has been an extensive and complex mission, with an estimated cost exceeding \$1 billion and a timeline of more than a year. The Corps is leading this effort in partnership with the state of Hawaii, Maui County, FEMA, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and industry partners. All debris operations are informed and guided by local cultural experts who are critical team members in the mission and who help the team respectfully remove debris while preserving the area's heritage.

Initial debris removal began in Kula and Olinda on November 7, 2023, and was completed by January 19, 2024. In Lahaina, where destruction was more severe, removal started on January 17, 2024. Thus far, the Corps has cleared numerous residential and commercial parcels, removed more than 3,100 vehicles, and removed 141 vessels from Lahaina Harbor. The debris removal in Lahaina is expected to continue until February 2025.

Immediately after the fire, the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and the EPA worked to retrieve all sunken and damaged vessels from the Lahaina Harbor. The USCG removed 87 sunken vessels, and a Corps contractor removed 54 other vessels, most of which were on trailers situated around the harbor. The Corps and the EPA worked together to defuel and disassemble the vessels. The County and Corps contractors collected burned vehicles in the rights-of-way and transported them to the vehicle collection point where county officials adjudicated the vehicle before it was crushed and hauled off the island. This is the same site where recyclable metal was hauled and stored before being crushed and banded for transport off the island.

The Corps also constructed a temporary elementary school to replace the destroyed King Kamehameha III Elementary School. It is comprised of 38 air-conditioned buildings (336 modular units in total), including 30 classrooms, a dining facility, an administrative building, and several support buildings. Completed in March 2024, this facility was built in just 95 days and now serves around 320 students, providing a much-needed sense of normalcy for the community. The school is well situated to accommodate up to 650 students, which was the enrollment before the fire displaced many families.

To address the acute housing shortage, FEMA tasked the Corps with preparing sites for temporary housing. On April 11, 2024, the Corps awarded a contract to Dawson, LLC, a Native Hawaiian owned business, for site preparation in Lahaina, named Kilohana, which will accommodate 169 homes. The site work will be complete not later than 28 October. The Corps is also in discussions regarding a second site in Ka'anapali that could support an additional 204 homes. In August 2024, FEMA provided the Corps a mission assignment to facilitate the installation of temporary housing units on personal property.

The success of our mission is largely due to the close collaboration between the Corps, FEMA, Maui County, and other stakeholders, including Native Hawaiians and other residents of Maui. This partnership was crucial in ensuring the safety and well-being of Lahaina and Kula residents and supporting their ability to rebuild. Employing local contractors, including native Hawaiian-owned businesses, has also been vital in fostering community trust and contributing to the local economy during the recovery.

Lahaina holds deep historical and cultural significance, once serving as the capital of the Hawaiian Kingdom and a center of Hawaiian culture. The Corps worked with cultural advisors and was sensitive to Native Hawaiian traditions, including pule (prayers), before missions and significant events. These practices, led by cultural monitors, honored the land and the people, fostering trust and respect within the community. This approach was critical in ensuring that our efforts were not just about rebuilding infrastructure but also about doing our part to help heal a community deeply rooted in its heritage.

Building trust with the local community and finding a suitable location for debris storage were significant challenges. When the Corps first arrived and started debris removal planning, the Corps had to build trust with the local communities in Kula and Lahaina.

For example, under the debris program, the property owners must sign a right-of-entry to their lots, so the Corps explained the program in detail and told them that the Corps was not here to take their land. The Corps reinforced this message through open and transparent communication during weekly Maui County public meetings, talking directly to community members and community elders about the debris program. The Corps also hired local labor and local cultural monitors to better connect with the public. When a work crew comprised of residents and cultural leaders arrived at a residential lot, residents felt a personal connection to the debris crews. This built credibility within the community, encouraging others to sign up for the debris removal program.

In late 2023, Maui County Mayor, Richard Bisson, helped secure a temporary disposal site (TDS) in West Maui that was a former cinder mine. The site was constructed in 45 days and was ready to receive material on January 17, 2024. The West Maui TDS, though controversial at first, has enabled the Corps to rapidly clear fire debris from Lahaina. In January 2024, Maui County passed Bill 120, which requires additional monitoring for the TDS to include groundwater monitoring wells and air quality monitors. The result of this testing, which ensures the safety of the environment and the community, is publicly shared with the community to increase transparency.

The recovery effort in Maui stands as a testament to the power of collaboration and leadership. From the outset, the Corps worked closely with FEMA, state, and local authorities, as well as community leaders, to ensure that the response was coordinated and culturally sensitive.

The Corps' partnership with Federal, state, and local agencies, alongside community stakeholders, has been critical to the progress made. Each team member, regardless of their organization, has worked with a singular focus to deliver for the people of Maui.

Over the past year, the Corps has proudly served alongside FEMA and other Federal, state, and local partners to help the survivors of the Maui wildfires. I was the commander of the Corps mission in Maui from February to August 2024. It was an honor to serve this community. In six months, the Corps finished the temporary school, completed nearly all residential and commercial debris removal, and completed the heavy earthwork for the Kilohana temporary housing site. More than that, the Corps team worked hand-in-hand with the people of Maui, with every team member serving as an ambassador to this community. I am most proud of the great partnership all teammates have developed regardless of their organization - USCG, EPA, FEMA, Small Business Administration, and Housing and Urban Development - to name a few. We all came to Maui singularly focused on delivery for the people of Kula and Lahaina.

In conclusion, the Corps is fully committed to the recovery and rebuilding of Lahaina and all affected areas on Maui. We will continue to work tirelessly to restore hope and stability to the community.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.