

# Fireworks explosion kills five workers in Hawaii

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Five workers were killed after an explosion ripped through an underground munitions storage bunker in Waikēle, Hawaii Friday morning.

The facility was stocked with powerful display fireworks, which continued to detonate and feed a fire through Saturday. According to the Associated Press, the explosion scorched trees and brush 40 feet away from the entrance. Firefighters told the Honolulu *Star-Advertiser* that they had initially received calls to respond to a vehicle fire, which had been set ablaze by the accident.

Killed in the explosion were Robert Leahey, 50; Kevin Freeman, 24; Neil Sprankle, 24; Justin Kelii, 29; and Bryan Cabalce Wahiawa, 25. Another unnamed worker was injured in the accident. Wahiawa had been transported to a hospital burn unit after the explosion, but died Friday evening. Hospital staff told the press he suffered burns over 100 percent of his body.

The men were employed by Donaldson Enterprises, Inc., a munitions detonations contractor that had recently been hired by the federal government to dispose of the fireworks. The accident is the latest in a growing list of fatal industrial accidents in the US over the past year, and one of two fireworks accidents in the US on Friday. In Nashville, Tennessee, 11 high school students were injured in a fireworks explosion at their school.

Many of the fireworks were the large caliber aerial type used in public displays, which had been brought into the United States illegally. Officials have not specified what initially sparked the blast.

On Saturday, the Honolulu bomb squad sent a robotic device into the bunker to take temperature readings and video inside in order to search for bodies of the victims.

Relatives and friends of the workers gathered outside the bunker Saturday morning to grieve and question authorities on the cause of the accident. Justin Kelii's grandfather, speaking to local KITV news, described the young man as a "very hard worker, very smart boy. I don't know how something like this could happen, especially one explosion while he's there, you know?" He added, "He didn't tell us much, but of course we were concerned. My wife was really concerned every day."

Fire officials told residents that the area was off limits because of the danger of further explosions. "They are decomposing with the heat and periodically still detonating," Honolulu Fire Captain Terry Seelig said of the fireworks. "It is an unsafe situation because of the instability of the materials. The heat is causing it to decompose, and poses a danger to the responders going in to the bunker, so we will have to wait until it cools down."

The bunker is one of 130 underground storage units in the Waikēle Business Center that was formerly a US Navy ammunition depot built into the mountainside. The site is located in an industrial area two miles north of the main shopping center in city. Waikēle is a working class area with extensive housing subdivisions and large outlet malls and other commerce.

Local news stations report that investigators with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives are expected to question Donaldson

Enterprises officials Monday on why the men were in the bunker at the time of the explosion.

The bunker was some 200 feet long and 16 feet wide—if even partially full, the amount of explosives was potentially in the hundreds of pounds. The Department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms specifies distances for storage of explosives totaling up to 300,000 pounds.

Regulations on pyrotechnics permit no more than 500 pounds of the explosive materials to be stored at any one time in a building or area during finishing or assembly, and all display fireworks not for immediate use are required to be “stored in covered, nonferrous containers.”

The law does not regulate, however, how long such material may be stockpiled in one place, or certain safety precautions such as exits for workers. The Waikele bunker had only one entrance.



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