

Hawaii declares state of emergency after heavy floods overwhelm roads and bridges

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The Governor of Hawaii, David Ige, declared a state of emergency Tuesday after torrential rains prompted evacuations, damaged homes, and almost caused a dam failure. The severe weather is expected to continue until Friday, when the state will release general funds to help those affected by the storms. The order covers Hawaii, Maui, Kalawao and Kauai counties, as well as the city and county of Honolulu.

The town of Haleiwa on the island of Oahu's North Shore was evacuated due to "catastrophic flooding," however, this order was rescinded seven hours later while road closures were kept in place.

The island of Maui was especially hit hard by rain damaging bridges and overflowing the Kaupakalua Dam, destroying several homes and rendering adjacent roads impassable. No deaths or injuries have yet to be reported.

Maui County Mayor Michael Victorino declared in a Monday news briefing that this is "a real flooding situation we have not seen in a long time," with some residents saying this was the worst flooding they had seen in 25 years.

The National Weather Service estimated that parts of Maui saw up to 19 total inches of rain as of Tuesday. Flash floods trapped people in their homes and forced those living downstream of the overflowing Kaupakalua Dam to evacuate.

Officials ordered everyone who lived near the Kaupakalua Dam in the town of Haiku to leave. The dam crested around 3:21 p.m. local time according to officials, but "after closer inspection" the next day it was determined there was "no structural damage."

The Kaupakalua Dam is one of the oldest agricultural dams in Maui at 57 feet high and 400 feet long, capable of holding 68 million gallons of water. Its owner is the East Maui Irrigation Co. and Mahi Pono Holdings Inc.

The dam was scheduled for removal this summer because of structural deficiencies according to the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources. The owners of the dam were required to empty its reservoirs during normal operations, except during storms when water passes through quickly.

Although Shan Tsutsui, chief operating officer of Mahi Pono, said in the statement that the dam had not been breached, county officials ordered all evacuees to remain out of the area until they gave the "all clear" announcement.

The state regulates 132 dams across the Hawaiian islands, most of which were built as part of the sugar cane industry's irrigation systems, according to a 2019 infrastructure report by the American Society of Civil Engineers.

At least 93 percent of the 132 dams listed in the 2019 report were classified as high hazard potential, meaning any dam failure could result in significant loss of life or property. In 2006, a collapse at the Kaloko dam on the island of Kauai killed seven people when water rushed downhill.

Maui firefighters had to respond to over a dozen emergency calls from residents who were trapped by floods this week. Officials reported that at least one bridge was "washed out" while another was "displaced." Several portions of roads either washed away, were flooded or blocked by debris.

While a flood advisory for Maui County was lifted Wednesday morning, a flash flood watch remained in effect. The National Weather Service also reported that flash flood watches were also in place for Kauai County and the city and county of Honolulu. The island of Oahu also saw heavy rainfall with several roads being closed and several homes reportedly damaged in the rural community of Hauula.

It was also reported by Hawaii News Now that two people were swept away by flash floods in two separate incidents. A 27-year-old man was washed away about 100 yards before being rescued on top of his truck, while another person remains missing.

Officials in Honolulu also said that about 8,200 gallons of partially treated wastewater spilled within the grounds of a local wastewater treatment plant and partly in the area of the James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge. The sewage spill was said to have lasted over two hours before the Honolulu Department of Environmental Services could respond.

Storms like the one which is inundating the Hawaii islands are being fueled and intensified by human induced climate change which is raising ocean temperatures and increasing the amount of moisture in the atmosphere. Kauai set a national 24-hour rain fall record in 2018 when 49.69 inches fell between April 14 and April 15.

“This is really an example of climate change in the present day,” Suzanne Case, the head of Hawaii’s Department of Land and Natural Resources, said in a statement. “We have a flood emergency because of the heavy rain bomb. And we’re seeing these more and more across the island chain—more frequent and more extreme events.”

“Don’t think that this is like a once-in-a-hundred-years event that you’ll only see once in your lifetime. It is changing,” University of Hawaii professor and state climatologist Pao-Shin Chu told the Associated Press.



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