

At least 36 killed as Maui is overrun by wildfires fueled by climate change

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Devastating wildfires swept across the Hawaiian island of Maui beginning Tuesday, destroying entire communities, killing at least thirty-six people and injuring many more. The flames were whipped into a firestorm by high winds from Hurricane Dora as it passed to the south of the US Pacific island chain.

The wildfires have raged out of control across the second largest island in the Hawaiian archipelago, which has an area of 727.2 square miles. The *New York Times* reported, “On the western side of Maui, the U.S. Coast Guard rescued at least a dozen people who jumped into the ocean to escape the surging fire, Maui County officials said. Others escaped by car, driving past flames in the shadow of the West Maui Mountains.”

CBS News reported that residents of the historic town of Lahaina “turned to the water as refuge Tuesday and officials said Wednesday that hospitals on the island were treating burn patients.” Hawaii Governor Josh Green, who was traveling outside the state, issued a statement saying much of the town “has been destroyed and hundreds of local families have been displaced.”

Ed Sniffen, director of the Hawaii state Department of Transportation, said the situation was “absolutely horrific.” As of Wednesday evening, the fires were still raging out of control.

More than 2,100 people were evacuated from the hardest hit areas and moved into shelters set up by the government. However, acting Governor Sylvia Luke told reporters Wednesday that, “We have shelters that are overrun” by the fast-moving fires.

Luke said she signed an emergency proclamation to discourage tourists from coming to the island, and activated the Hawaii National Guard. “This is not a safe place to be,” she told a news conference. Visitors are being evacuated to Kahului Airport, and those just

arriving are being turned around and told to return home.

Luke also said the state government was unprepared for the wildfires, saying, “We expect rain, sometimes we expect floods. We never anticipated in this date that a hurricane which did not make impact on our islands would cause these type of wildfires.”

Power is out in many areas, including where the shelters are located, and 4,000 people are reported to be stranded in West Maui with access roads to the east shut down. According to poweroutage.us, there are more than 13,000 customers without power in Maui.

Residents have posted videos taken from their cars on social media that show a living hell of fires blazing all around them and with no idea where to go. In one tweet, a driver and his passengers can be heard breathing heavily in their smoke-filled car, desperately trying to flee the inferno. In a Facebook post, an aerial video revealed the decimation of Lahaina by the fires.

Kuhio, a teacher living on the eastern part of Maui away from the fire, told the WSWs, “I’ve been monitoring since 2:00 this morning because several civil alarms on my phone went off about evacuating in different parts of Maui.

“Last night around 9:00, Walmart was unusually packed, so I didn’t even go in. I think it was stranded people who can’t return to the fire-impacted areas. And then I smelled smoke about 10:00. There was fire about five miles away at Maui Lani. I’m still waiting to hear back from people. ... The fire department and helicopters don’t fly with high winds.”

Kuhio spoke about the role of government policy and corporate interests in enabling the disaster and endangering lives, “Development is allowed with no consideration for a natural crisis. I worked at a school directly across from the beach. The tsunami plan was

for staff and 900 students to walk up an incline to a school above us less than a mile away, but that wasn't far or high enough. If you were disabled, then you were driven. In a real tsunami, lucky if one percent survive.

"Lahaina is arid and hot because the natural waterways have been tapped and the land is dried up. It's a tinderbox out there with all the brown dried grass. No lessons were learned nor applied from the big 2018 fire. Fire mitigation has to include land restoration practices."

Speaking of conditions now facing those impacted by the fires, Kuhio noted, "Shelters don't provide beds or toiletries. Communications are down due power outages and downed cell towers, I believe. And there's no cable internet if there's no power. A whole elementary school was burned down—Kamehameha III Elementary School."

Weather experts have said that the winds from Hurricane Dora were a factor in the intensity and traveling speed of the fires.

Fox Weather reported that Dora was, "indirectly enhancing the winds across Hawaii," and that, "the pressure gradient created by Dora in conjunction with the ridge of high pressure" were responsible for the winds. The winds on the island that fueled the fast-moving fires were gusting as high as 70 miles per hour.

The National Hurricane Center (NHC) and the Central Pacific Hurricane Center showed the Category 4 hurricane had maximum sustained winds of 130 mph and was moving west at 22 mph. As of Wednesday morning, Dora was 860 miles south of Honolulu, the capital of Hawaii on the island of Oahu, and the most populous city in the state.

The NHC said that movement of Dora was expected to continue and then it will begin to slow and gradually weaken over the next two days. The agency said hurricane-force winds extend outward up to 30 miles from the center, and tropical storm-force winds extend outward up to 115 miles.

Climate scientists have said that, although Hawaii has been known for its tropical conditions and bouts of intense rain, the islands have become prone to wildfire damage because of climate change. The island of Maui is the driest in the state, with West Maui facing moderate drought conditions, according to the US Drought Monitor.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration reports that the average temperature on the Hawaiian islands has risen two degrees Fahrenheit since the 1950s and its expected to rise a further five degrees by 2085.

Clay Trauernicht, a tropical fire specialist at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, told the *New York Times* that wildfires are now burning four times the acreage on the islands compared to previous decades. Several significant fires erupted on Maui in August 2018, destroying dozens of homes and forcing hundreds to flee. And in 2021 more than 40,000 acres burned on the Big Island and Maui, in what was the largest fire season to date.



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