

Death toll from wildfires in Maui reaches 55, with many more expected

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Deaths from wildfires on the Hawaiian island of Maui rose to 55 on Friday morning with local officials expecting the number to go significantly higher as rescue teams continue their search for survivors and victims. The disaster will likely be the deadliest since Hawaii became the last of the 50 US states in 1959.

Firefighters have dropped approximately 150,000 gallons of water on the fires, but the high winds that caused the fires to spread rapidly out of control in the first place Tuesday night have hindered rescue and firefighting efforts.

Hawaii Department of Defense Adjutant General Ken Hara said in a news conference on Thursday, “Because the winds were so high, we couldn’t provide the helicopters to do the water bucket support.” Hara added that Maui County firefighters had “a hard time” containing the fires due to gusts that have reportedly reached 85 mph.

The flames moved so swiftly that some victims were burned alive in their cars. An online database called the Maui Fire People Locator maintained by resident Ellie Erickson and shared widely on social media showed more than 1,300 people had yet to be located as of Thursday evening.

Residents are reporting that the number of dead is much higher than official reports. One tweet on Thursday morning said there were “body’s [sic] all over town and in the water that have not been accounted for and reported yet. So many people never made it out. There are possibly hundreds dead and even more missing.”

A rescue volunteer posted a video on Facebook describing the tragedy he saw in Lahaina, a community of more than 12,000 residents. He said he saw 50 bodies that have already been recovered by the Coast Guard and National Guard. He also said three dump

trucks had been sent into the area for the purpose of body recovery.

The blazes that raged across Maui since Tuesday continue to burn with fires also now reported on the islands of Oahu and the Big Island of Hawaii. As of Thursday morning, the fires that destroyed most of the town of Lahaina on the west side of Maui were 80 percent contained, according to county officials.

Aerial video shot over historic Lahaina showed entire neighborhoods had been wiped out and turned to ash. The Associated Press (AP) reported, “Block after block was nothing but rubble and blackened foundations, including along famous Front Street, where tourists shopped and dined just days ago. Boats in the harbor were scorched, and smoke hovered over the town, which dates to the 1700s and is the biggest community on the island’s west side.”

Hawaii Governor Josh Green told AP, “Lahaina, with a few rare exceptions, has been burned down,” with more than 1,000 structures destroyed by fire. The Governor also said, “As we get into the many hundreds of houses that were overwhelmed by fire, of course we have great concerns that we’ll find the remains of people that weren’t able to escape.”

Hawaii Emergency Management Agency spokesman Adam Weintraub told news media, “Some of the aerial footage that we’ve seen from the area reminds me of the pictures from Dresden from World War II,” referring to the German city that was almost completely destroyed by Allied bombings in February 1945.

The deadly speed of the Maui wildfire recalls the devastating Camp Fire which raged through Butte County in the Sierra foothills of Northern California for over two weeks in 2018. That fire was the deadliest and most destructive in the history of California, killing 85 residents of the town of Paradise.

At its peak, the Camp Fire was spreading at the rate of 80 football fields per minute and sending embers in many directions for miles. It destroyed over 18,804 structures and burned over 153,000 acres. Many of those who died were unable to evacuate in time, some died in their cars while others perished in their homes without receiving any notice of warning that the flames were coming.

President Joe Biden issued a perfunctory three-paragraph White House statement on Thursday declaring a “major disaster” in Hawaii. Biden ordered federal aid to areas affected by wildfires and mobilized the US Coast Guard, Navy Third Fleet and the Army “to help with fire suppression and search and rescue on the Island of Maui.”

As with every disaster involving the forces of nature that are being amplified by capitalist-made climate change, the ruling establishment is quick to absolve themselves of any responsibility for creating the conditions that lead to death and destruction that has been predicted by the scientific community for decades.

Numerous reports are now revealing that the island of Maui had become a tinderbox in recent decades and was primed for a disaster. In one study by researchers at the University of Hawaii and the University of Colorado published in 2015, for example, they found that the previous 25 years saw rainfall at selected monitoring sites fall 31 percent lower in the wet season and 6 percent lower in the dry season.

On Thursday, the *New York Times* spoke to Abby Frazier, a climatologist at Clark University who has researched Hawaii, who said that there are multiple causes of the climate shift in Hawaii.

One is a weather pattern known as La Niña that began delivering less rainfall to the Hawaiian islands beginning in the 1980s. The weaker La Niñas, “are not bringing us out of drought,” Dr. Frazier said. Another factor is that higher temperatures cause the clouds over Hawaii to thin out and, with less cloud cover, there is less precipitation. On top of that, big storms have been moving north over time—delivering less of the rainfall that they typically bring to the islands.

Dr. Frazier said all three of these factors are the result of rising temperatures, “There’s likely a climate change signal in everything we see,” she said.

Another study published by the University of Hawaii in 2016 cited deforestation and the abandonment of

agricultural lands along with the introduction of non-native, fire-prone grasses as factors making Hawaii more susceptible to fire.

Experts have said that the vegetation in the lowland areas of Maui was very dry this year, after below-average precipitation in the spring and summer. According to data issued by the US Drought Monitor on Thursday, almost 16 percent of Maui County is in severe drought and an additional 20 percent is in moderate drought. These are the areas where the fires are burning.

In the place of crops such as pineapple and sugar cane grown on farms, and other native vegetation, dry and invasive grasses have spread. The invasive grasses, such as Guinea grass, which can grow as quickly as 15 centimeters a day and reach up to three meters tall, are better able to regrow after a fire and are also quick to ignite. This is one factor in the rapidity of the fires’ spread.

As Ryan Longman, a research fellow at the educational institute East-West Center, told the *Times*, “The landscape is just covered with flammable stuff. All of the conditions just came together.”

These underlying circumstances—all of which are man-made and given free rein under the capitalist system—were set in motion by the winds from Hurricane Dora, which passed south of Hawaii as a Category 4 storm on Tuesday. Although the hurricane was hundreds of miles to the south of Maui, it contributed to wind speeds of greater than 60 miles per hour, helping to spread the fire at unprecedented speed.



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