

Maui disaster sirens never sounded as deadly fire engulfed hundreds of homes

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As the official death toll from the Maui wildfires reached 67 on Friday, questions were being raised about why Hawaii's disaster warning system was never activated when the climate change-fueled inferno was spreading rapidly across the island.

According to a PBS report on Thursday, Hawaii emergency management records “show no indication that warning sirens sounded before people ran for their lives from wildfires on Maui,” and, instead, “officials sent alerts to mobile phones, televisions and radio stations—but widespread power and cellular outages may have limited their reach.”

Hawaii has what the state says is the largest integrated outdoor all-hazard public safety warning system in the world. This includes about 400 sirens across the archipelago to alert people to various natural disasters and other threats. The system was created in the aftermath of a tsunami that struck Hawaii in 1946 and killed more than 150 people.

Along with the fact that the sirens were not activated, according to a report by BBC on Friday, Maui officials issued contradictory information about the extent and danger of the flames as they were being whipped up Wednesday. The Maui County website issued a statement on Wednesday at 9:00 a.m. that said a brush fire had been “100% contained,” although “winds in the area remain a concern.”

In addition to “a warning to avoid blocked roads,” the BBC report said, “officials gave no further warnings,” regarding the situation in Lahaina until 4:45 p.m. local time, when the county said, “an apparent flare-up” of the fire had “caused the closure of a bypass near the town, as well as some evacuations.”

Further evacuations were announced later that afternoon, followed by an emergency declaration by Mayor Richard Bissen before 11:00 p.m. local time that

night. Tourists in some hotels were instructed to remain in place to avoid clogging up local roads. However, by this time, flames driven by high winds from Hurricane Dora in the Pacific Ocean to the south of the islands had already engulfed parts of Lahaina, forcing some people to flee into the sea.

Even though conditions for the eruption of wildfires were well known and warned about, local, state and federal officials were completely unprepared for the intensity and speed of the devastation.

On Wednesday, acting Governor Sylvia Luke admitted as much during a press conference when she said, “We never anticipated in this state that a hurricane which did not make impact on our islands will cause this type of wildfires, wildfires that wiped out communities, wildfires that wiped out businesses, wildfires that destroyed homes.”

Adam Weintraub of the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency told the Associated Press (AP) that the records do not show that Maui's warning sirens were triggered when the Lahaina fire began on Tuesday. Weintraub said the county used emergency alerts sent to mobile phones, televisions and radio stations.

Brad Ventura, chief of the Maui Fire Department, said the fire moved so quickly from brush to neighborhoods that it was impossible to get messages to the emergency management agencies responsible for issuing the alerts. “What we experienced was such a fast-moving fire through the ... initial neighborhood that caught fire they were basically self-evacuating with fairly little notice,” Ventura said.

Survivors told news media on Thursday that they did not hear any sirens or receive any warnings giving them enough time to prepare and only realized they were in danger when they saw the flames or heard nearby

explosions.

The Maui wildfires are Hawaii's deadliest disaster since a 1960 tsunami killed 61 people. Officials are warning that the death toll will continue to rise as search and rescue operations continue, and more victims are found.

Firefighters were still battling flames on parts of the island on Friday as rescue workers continued the work of trying to locate more than 1,000 people who are missing. Thousands of residents have been displaced by the fires that swept across the island and destroyed more than 1,700 structures and decimated the historic town of Lahaina.

With power and cellular service out in most areas, evacuation and search and rescue efforts have been made extremely difficult.

Another indication of the capitalist political establishment's unpreparedness for the deadly wildfires is the fact that Maui's firefighting staff is very small and ill-equipped for the events of Tuesday and Wednesday. Bobby Lee, the president of the Hawaii Firefighters Association, spoke to AP and said there are a maximum of 65 firefighters working at any given time in Maui County, and they are responsible for fighting fires on three islands: Maui, Molokai and Lanai.

The Maui crews have about 13 fire engines and two ladder trucks, all of which are designed for on-road use. The department does not have any off-road vehicles, which means fire crews are unable to attack brush fires thoroughly before they reach roads or populated areas, Lee said.

Meanwhile, more reports are emerging that government officials knew about the danger of rapidly spreading wildfires in Hawaii from the experience of Hurricane Lane in 2018. The storm, which narrowly missed making direct landfall with Hawaii, still inundated Hawaiian islands with flooding and whipped up wildfires that burned 3,000 acres across Maui and Oahu.

The fires fueled by winds from Lane were analyzed by a team of researchers from the University of Hawaii and the East-West Center. Their research was published in the *Bulletin of the American Meteorological Society* two years after that storm entitled, "Fire and Rain: The Legacy of Hurricane Lane in Hawaii."

The researchers pointed to the confluence of

conditions that would result from hurricane events in Hawaii. They said that further research was needed to determine whether hurricane-fire events were going to become more frequent. The research paper said, "A complete understating of these factors is critical to understanding the vulnerability of people and resources exposed during a severe weather event."

Another document written in 2014 entitled the "Western Maui Community Wildfire Plan" identified West Maui as specifically susceptible to wildfires. Elizabeth Pickett, co-executive director of the nonprofit Hawaii Wildfire Management Organization and a coauthor of the plan, said that the devastating Maui fire was foreseeable.

Pickett told *Honolulu Civic Beat*, "We keep hearing from certain elected officials and other people being quoted in the media, 'we had no idea, this is unprecedented.' But actually, those of us in the wildfire community, meaning our fire agencies, our forestry natural resource management community, we have long been working to increase our risk reduction efforts."

Of course, most of the actions recommended by the scientists were either ignored or never fully implemented. Pickett said even though the Maui fire had multiple factors that complicated fire control efforts, more could have been done to prevent it ahead of time. She added that Hawaii's policies, codes, enforcement and resources have not kept up with the accelerated threats.

"We know there's high risk. We know the science, we have the data, we've done the assessments, we have the community programs in place. It might not have been 100% preventable, but it could have been mitigated. It could have been lessened," Pickett said.



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