

While Biden vacations at billionaire's Lake Tahoe mansion

# 115 dead and hundreds still missing in Maui wildfire disaster

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After spending six hours in Maui feigning sympathy for the families of those who died and those who have lost everything in the wildfire disaster, President Joe Biden and wife Jill took a direct flight on Air Force One back to Nevada to resume their vacation at a billionaire's luxury mansion in Lake Tahoe last week.

Biden, who was joined by numerous family members, including his son Hunter, began his nine-day stay at the three-acre lakefront property of Tom Steyer on August 18. Steyer is a hedge fund manager and Democratic Party supporter whose personal wealth is estimated at \$1.5 billion.

The mansion, located in the exclusive and gated Glenbrook community, is estimated to be worth \$18.1 million. Steyer, who lives in New York City, bought it in 2007 for \$15 million, according to Douglas County records. Originally built in 1968, the 4,000-square-foot mansion sits on Lake Tahoe's east shore and has six bedrooms and five bathrooms.

The White House sought to downplay Biden's relationship with the elite financier by pointing out that his administration had signed a "fair market" rental agreement for a sum that was not disclosed. This revelation prompted residents to complain to local officials that Steyer did not have a Vacation Home Rental Permit and was in violation of the county code.

It was obvious that Biden's trip to Maui was an exercise in damage control following his weeklong silence, as he sat on the beach at his vacation home in Delaware and then responded to reporters with "no comment" when asked what he had to say about the devastating wildfire.

As the Bidens made their hasty return to one of the wealthiest communities in the US, the extent of the

horrifying and deadly destruction from the Maui wildfire three weeks ago continued to impact working class families on the Hawaiian island.

On Thursday, Maui county officials reported that 115 people were confirmed dead from the fast-moving blaze that burned much of the historic town of Lahaina to the ground on August 8 and 9. While just 46 of those killed have been identified, details about what happened to some of them are now emerging.

Joe Schilling, 67, chose to stay behind as the fire swept through his apartment complex, along with several other elderly residents who were unable to evacuate due to mobility problems. In text messages reviewed by ABC News, Schilling told a friend that there were "multiple houses on fire right across from me" and that he "can't leave, can't see."

Schilling then wrote, "We are trapped can't see a thing plus when u try to breathe it burns ur lungs. Breathing through wet towels, 6 of us in one unit."

Another of the confirmed dead is seven-year-old Tony Takafua, the first identified child victim of the wildfire. Takafua's remains, along with those of three relatives, were found in a burned car near their home. Others killed include his mother, Salote Tone, 39, and his grandparents Faaoso Tone, 70, and Maluifonua Tone, 73.

County officials also released on Thursday a list of 388 names of those thought to be missing. Within a day, friends, relatives and internet researchers went through the names and reported that more than 100 of those on the list were safe, according to the FBI, although these reports were still being verified.

In a press conference on Friday, Maui County Mayor Richard Bissen announced that Darryl Oliveira will be

the interim administrator of the Maui Emergency Management Agency, a week after Herman Andaya resigned from the post amid criticism for his response to the wildfire.

Andaya resigned on August 17, one day after he publicly defended his decision not to activate the island's extensive warning sirens while the Lahaina wildfire was spreading rapidly. He said the sirens were not sounded because they would have created confusion and sent Lahaina residents into the path of the fire.

The warning sirens, touted by Hawaiian officials as the most sophisticated anywhere in the world, were designed decades ago for the purpose of alerting the public to evacuate for oncoming hurricanes or tsunamis. "The public is trained to seek higher ground in the event that the sirens are sounded," Andaya said.

The county government reported on Thursday that it had sued the Hawaiian Electric company for causing the fires. The lawsuit says the utility company acted negligently by failing to shut off power despite exceptionally high winds and dry conditions. The county is seeking compensation for damage to public property and resources in Lahaina, as well as in nearby Kula.

Witness accounts and video footage show that sparks from power lines ignited fires as utility poles snapped in the wind, driven by Hurricane Dora, which was passing to the south of the island. In a statement, Hawaiian Electric said it was "very disappointed that Maui County chose this litigious path while the investigation is still unfolding."

Hawaiian Electric is a publicly traded utility that serves 95 percent of Hawaii's electricity customers. In 2022, the electricity monopoly generated \$3.74 billion in revenue and a profit of \$241 million.

The company is also being sued by Lahaina residents, who accuse it of fraud for failing to disclose that its wildfire prevention and safety measures were inadequate.

The anger of the public over the inaction and indifference of the US government to the crisis in Maui continues to find expression on social media. On Friday, Mint Press published a video interview on X (Twitter) with a Maui resident, who said, "I think Joe Biden should take his \$700, get back on the f\*\*\*ing plane and go home... \$700 compared to all the millions

he's giving Ukraine? Why? We need it."



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