

Hawaii road in limbo as Mauna Loa lava continues to crawl

December 8 2022, by Jennifer Sinco Kelleher



A man talks on a phone in his car alongside Saddle Road as the Mauna Loa volcano erupts Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Officials monitoring the Mauna Loa eruption on Hawaii's Big island said Wednesday, Dec. 7, the lava flow moving toward state Route 200 has slowed. They said they could not predict when, where or if the lava flow would cross the highway. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull, File

About a week-and-a-half since the world's largest volcano began erupting, Hawaii officials continue to brace for slow-moving lava to intersect with a crucial Big Island road, even though scientists are not sure when or even if that will happen.

On Wednesday morning, [lava](#) from Mauna Loa, which began erupting Nov. 27 after being quiet for 38 years, was 1.8 miles (2.89 kilometers) from Saddle Road, also known as Route 200 or Daniel K. Inouye Highway, scientists with the U.S. Geological Survey said. The [road](#) connects the east and west sides of the vast island.

Last week, officials said the earliest the lava could hit the road was one week. But, as expected, the lava slowed considerably in recent days as it moved across flatter ground, leaving scientists unable to estimate a clearer timeline.

"I wish we could give a better answer," David Phillips, deputy scientist-in-charge at USGS's Hawaiian Volcano Observatory, said Wednesday. "And so just based on its current behavior and all the variables involved, it's very difficult to estimate a time, a place or even an if, it would intersect the highway."

The flow front seemed even less active Wednesday than the previous day, possibly because of a breakout of lava headed upslope that could be diverting lava from what's headed to the highway, Phillips said.



Motorists make their way along as people search for a vantage point of the erupting Mauna Loa volcano, Friday, Dec. 2, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Officials monitoring the Mauna Loa eruption on Hawaii's Big island said Wednesday, Dec. 7, the lava flow moving toward state Route 200 has slowed. They said they could not predict when, where or if the lava flow would cross the highway.
Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull, File

Scientists were monitoring the overflow about 2.5 miles (4 kilometers) upslope from the lava front but it wasn't currently posing any threat, Phillips said. It was unclear if it would continue to be active, but if does, it would be a while before it reached the road, he said.

Hawaii County Mayor Mitch Roth said planning for a road closure continues. Residents of the island are bracing for major upheaval if lava

makes the road impassable, forcing drivers to find alternate coastal routes, which could add hours to commute times.



People watch and record images of lava from the Mauna Loa volcano Thursday, Dec. 1, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. Officials monitoring the Mauna Loa eruption on Hawaii's Big island said Wednesday, Dec. 7, the lava flow moving toward state Route 200 has slowed. They said they could not predict when, where or if the lava flow would cross the highway. Credit: AP Photo/Gregory Bull, File

Roth warned that the road could even close before the lava arrives if some [lava-gawkers](#) continue behaving badly, including people hiking onto closed areas to get a closer glimpse.

Thousands of motorists driving along the road to watch the lava prompted officials to open a one-way "mitigation route" last week.



Spectators watch the lava flow down the mountain from the Mauna Loa eruption, Nov. 29, 2022, near Hilo, Hawaii. On Wednesday, Dec. 7, the lava from Mauna Loa, was 1.8 miles from Saddle Road, also known as Route 200 or Daniel K. Inouye Highway, scientists with the U.S. Geological Survey said. Credit: AP Photo/Marco Garcia, File

The route seems to have helped reduce collisions that were happening at night when lava-viewing traffic increased, officials said.

About 20 members of the National Guard were dispatched to help with

managing lava-related issues, including safety and traffic. The county also hired some [security guards](#) to help keep people from going into prohibited areas, Roth said.

"As we're looking at this lava flow, you know, the concern hasn't been so much for people getting hurt by lava," Roth said Tuesday, "it's people getting seriously injured by traffic crashes."

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