

# Hawaii wildfires stoke climate denial, conspiracy theories

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An aerial image shows destroyed homes and vehicles in the aftermath of the Maui wildfires in Lahaina, Hawaii on August 17, 2023.

Climate change-denying social media accounts are exploiting the deadly wildfires in Hawaii to push conspiracy theories that high-energy lasers were used to spark the flames.

Posts invoking such technologies or claiming the blazes were set intentionally to create climate-friendly cities have generated millions of engagements on platforms such as X.

"Only a Directed Energy Weapon (DEW) can cause this kind of destruction," far-right radio host Stew Peters said in one post on the site, formerly known as Twitter.

The narrative's surge highlights what disinformation experts say is a trend in which conspiracy theorists deny the science of climate change in response to [extreme weather events](#).

"Any time there is a climate-related event and advocates call for accelerated [climate action](#), there usually is a corresponding attempt to discredit climate science, disconnect the event from climate change and blame it on something else," said Arunima Krishna, a Boston University professor who studies climate disinformation. "In this case, directed energy weapons."

X and other sites are littered with posts falsely claiming to show photos and videos of Hawaii being targeted by such systems, which use concentrated electromagnetic energy and are being developed in the United States for drone and missile defense.

But the visuals spreading online are unrelated to the fires that killed at least 111 people and leveled the seaside town of Lahaina on Maui.

AFP's fact-checkers have debunked posts that misrepresent shots of a SpaceX rocket launch in California, a flare at an Ohio oil refinery, power lines sparking in Louisiana, a Chinese satellite and a transformer exploding in Chile, among other outdated images circulating in multiple languages.

Some posts shared a photo that was doctored to add a beam of light to the sky, while others claimed natural phenomena—such as the fires' failure to burn some trees—were evidence of lasers.

"The theory is especially adaptable to [social media](#) because it fits with pictures taken of fires that show beams of light supposedly coming from space," said Mike Rothschild, a [conspiracy theory](#) expert and author of the book "Jewish Space Lasers."

"It works on the lack of basic understanding that conspiracy believers have of how fire and wind work."

## 'Conspiratorial universe'

Iain Boyd, an expert on directed energy weapons at the University of Colorado, told AFP the conspiracy theory defies reality in part because a laser with enough power to spark the Hawaii blazes would require an "enormous" air or spacecraft that could not go unnoticed.

Authorities are still probing what started the inferno, but the National Weather Service issued warnings about dangerous fire conditions as a hurricane brought strong winds to an area with dry vegetation. US media have cited fallen power lines as a possible source.

"With winds this severe and a large amount of dry grass surrounding the community, there is no need for an ignition from 'space,'" said Michael Gollner, who researches fire dynamics at the University of California-Berkeley. "Obviously these are really crazy allegations."

Jennie King, head of climate research and policy at the London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue, said wildfire disinformation has evolved over the years.

In a 2018 Facebook post, US congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene suggested a beam shot from space could have caused blazes that year in California.

Most of the disinformation King observed around global wildfires in 2019 sought to blame arsonists rather than climate change. Within a few years, specific groups such as Black Lives Matter had become a common scapegoat.

More recent claims about the government using lasers to usher in climate-friendly cities advance the same central idea that global warming is insignificant, King said—but they also invoke a broader worldview harbored by supporters of QAnon and other [conspiracy theories](#).

"They fit into this conspiratorial universe around a globalist cabal, a New World Order or a shadowy group of elites that are trying to implement their agenda," King said.

The dramatic, out-of-context visuals shared online capitalize on these fears, Rothschild said.

"It's easy to use those pictures as 'proof' of what 'they' are doing to us to further their climate change agenda or societal control, and people desperate for answers would rather believe in space weapons than the reality of the [climate](#) crisis."

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