

Maui wildfires point to a long, painful road ahead, disaster recovery expert says

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Daniel Aldrich, director of the security and resilience studies program and professor of political science and public policy. Credit: Ruby Wallau/Northeastern University

The devastating wildfires that swept quickly through the Hawaiian island of Maui this week have claimed the lives of at least 36 people. The wind-

whipped flames left the historic town of Lahaina, known as a site of Hawaiian cultural heritage, in ruins. As a result of the devastation, President Joe Biden issued a major disaster declaration on Thursday.

For an island community already dealing with some of the highest rates of homelessness nationwide, the destruction wrought by the fires couldn't have come at a worse time. On top of that, disaster recovery for communities living in such geographic isolation could prove uniquely logistically difficult.

Northeastern Global News spoke with Daniel Aldrich, a Northeastern professor who directs the university's Security and Resilience Program and co-directs the Global Resilience Institute, about the challenges facing Hawaii, its affected island community and the broader emergency response. The conversation has been edited for brevity and clarity.

To start off, I know disaster recovery is your area of focus. What can you tell us about how a disaster like this affects the people living in Maui and its surrounding communities?

I've been through a disaster with Hurricane Katrina, so I saw from the inside what people who lose their homes have to go through. And of course my research around the world has been on the process of recovery—how long it takes, how do we know if it's going well, etc.

I think the Maui recovery is going to be very challenging for a number of reasons. Hawaii's major issue is that housing has been in very short supply. Just consider the number of homeless people (the number of homeless people, too, who live and work in Hawaii) who couldn't afford houses before this [fire](#) happened. It's a lot of people. I remember driving in Hawaii away from the popular tourist beaches more than a decade

ago, and someone told me that 25,000 Hawaiians who had jobs lived on the beaches, in RVs or cars, because the cost of housing was so high.

I would predict that what we're going to see—what we've already seen—is a major challenge for both residents and authorities, which is that housing was already in short supply. Maui's lost several hundred homes, and even if the homes there weren't already severely damaged by the fires, when we put out the fires using water, the water then often creates mold, so you'd have to take down the studs anyway. We're going to have the activation of hundreds of [insurance policies](#), many of which may not have necessarily been insured for fire.

That's the thing about living in Hawaii: there have been tsunamis there; there have been a number of water-based disasters; but there hasn't been a fire like this in a very long time. So the question will be: do people actually have insurance?

Even with insurance, recovering your home is going to be a problem. There's often about a 30% gap, even with full coverage—even if you can convince the insurance companies that these fires were an act of God—there will still be a financial cost individuals will have to bear. And, it's Hawaii, meaning labor will be in short supply. We see this after natural disasters—it's very challenging to get the laborers and materials on the island without prices spiking. This is not because people are gouging. You can't increase the number of workers available at any one time because there's no place for them to stay.

Given Hawaii's location—some 2,200 miles from the mainland US—what logistical challenges are emergency and disaster personnel facing in getting people the help they need?

You're going to need FEMA trailers and temporary homes for everyone who lost a home. These are secondary problems. Again, long-term housing is going to be a big problem. It's going to be expensive. Insurance isn't going to cover the full cost of recovery, and we don't have space on the island for workers to simply come in. Barges can be one potential solution.

In New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, they actually brought in a barge for a hospital, because there was no hospital. I don't know the state of health infrastructure in Maui, but it could be the case that some of the clinics and hospitals that were damaged would need to be replaced. For example, the U.S. Navy has a ship they often send around to provide short-term or medium-term care. As far as long-term care, it's important to consider that they may have lost retirement communities there. Think about all of the different levels of vulnerable individuals living in Maui right now.

Unlike New Orleans, the people there are in trouble in the sense that you can't just expand the island. The island expands from [volcanic activity](#)—from lava cooling and eventually becoming new land. But that's not really happening. With some 200 homes directly destroyed, you've got some 2,000 people in shelters and elsewhere. Again, there's no space.

You have a bunch of broader issues as well. You have the tourists who are there short term, who will probably get off the island without problem. Of course there were those horrific images of people fleeing into the water, which is one of the worst things you could think have happen. Then we have the problem of housing. The people whose houses were destroyed: Where will they stay in the short term? If they need a trailer, how are they going to get a trailer from the mainland to Hawaii? It's incredibly expensive to get stuff to Hawaii. Everything will have to be shipped by sea or flown over. Again, the trailers that we had in New Orleans often came on trucks.

Because Maui has so much green space preserved for tourism, will the island now allow some of that space to be cut down and converted from tourism green space to housing space? This is going to be a major challenge for local authorities who want to maximize tourism but also need places for their people to live in the meantime.

Do you think that this was something the Hawaii government and the localities ever thought would happen?

The governor said in a public interview that excessive rain, floods and other water-related disasters are on their minds. But a hurricane whipping up a fire wasn't necessarily on their agenda. It reminds me of the Marshall Fire in Colorado [in 2021]. It was a relatively suburban area with very large roads nearby, and the thought then was that no fire could ever jump those roads. Well, one did. This is now very clear evidence of the kind of problems communities are going to have in the realm of climate change, when communities that might be used to having one kind of disaster—maybe heat if you live in Arizona, or wildfires in California—are suddenly faced with a disaster of a different kind.

In Hawaii's case, with this disaster, the people there are going from what is normally hurricane season into fire season. So we are seeing these compound disasters, where a problem that might be ordinarily containable and more short term, becomes a major one that is going to disrupt the economy and people's lives.

Also consider that the [physical infrastructure](#) in Hawaii was not built for this kind of disaster. Most communities, in fact, are not built for this. I mean, I live in Brighton, [Massachusetts]. If we had a fire in our backyard—which we did a few months ago, actually—the roads are very narrow, so even getting the firetruck up to where we live took about 10

minutes, and a house about 30 yards from ours burned down in the meantime. A lot of communities lack infrastructure because we simply don't imagine it's likely that we're going to have this kind of shock—and certainly, in this case, because it was outside the normal kinds of shock that Hawaii faces.

What does the future hold for Maui and those who live there?

In Hawaii's case, there is a very strong-knit community there. It's very likely we're going to hear stories in the coming days about people whose lives were saved by neighbors knocking on doors, helping them get out, find shelter, etc. That's very typical. Oftentimes, it's not a uniformed fire official who comes to save us—it's your neighbor. That's all the more so when it's a tight-knit community. I think that's going to prove to be a silver lining in this recovery process.

Provided by Northeastern University

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