

Wind-whipped Hawaii wildfire razes town, deaths feared

August 10 2023



Flames from a Hawaii wildfire stoked by hurricane winds threatened parts of Lahaina, on the island of Maui, and forced evacuations.

Wildfires whipped by hurricane winds tore through a Hawaiian town Wednesday, razing homes and forcing residents to jump into the ocean, with officials saying they feared people had died in the fast-moving flames.

US Coast Guard officers plucked at least a dozen people from the water

as [emergency services](#) were overwhelmed by a disaster that appeared to have erupted almost without warning.

Lieutenant Governor Sylvia Luke issued an emergency proclamation and told CNN the hospital system on the island of Maui "was overburdened with burn patients, people suffering from inhalation."

"The reality is that we need to fly people out of Maui to give them burn support," she said, without providing figures on the number of injured.

"911 is down. Cell service is down. Phone service is down," she said.

The worst damage appeared to be in Lahaina, a tourist town of 12,000 on the northwestern tip of Maui, one of a number of islands which make up the US state in the Pacific.

Video posted on [social media](#) showed blazes tearing through the heart of the beachfront town and sending up huge plumes of black smoke.

"People are jumping into the water to avoid the fire," US Army Major General Kenneth Hara, the state adjutant general, told Hawaii News Now.

The Coast Guard said it had "successfully rescued 12 individuals from the waters off Lahaina" and it was sending other vessels to Maui.

Hara said the [strong winds](#) were currently preventing helicopters from being used to carry out rescues or fight the fires.

Governor Josh Green said it was likely that people would have died in the disaster.

"Much of Lahaina on Maui has been destroyed and hundreds of local

families have been displaced," said Green.

"Heroic efforts by first responders have prevented many casualties from occurring, but some loss of life is expected."

Lahaina resident Claire Kent said she had seen her neighborhood burned less than an hour after she fled.

"The flames had moved all the way down to the end of the neighborhood," she told CNN.

"We were pulling out... onto the highway, you look back and there's cars with flames on both sides of the road, people stuck in traffic trying to get out," Kent said, describing the dangerous scene as "something out of a horror movie."

"I know for a fact people didn't get out," she said, adding that homeless people and people without access to vehicles seemed to have been trapped in the town.



An image provided by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows fierce wildfires on the west coast of Maui, in the US state of Hawaii.

Water on fire

Kent described how power and cell phone coverage had been knocked out Tuesday, and she had been unaware of any approaching danger until a sudden shift of wind sparked panic.

"It was all just word of mouth, like people running down the street saying 'you need to get out.'

"There were guys riding around on bicycles, just screaming at people to leave."

For those who managed to flee, there was worry over missing family.

"I still don't know where my little brother is," Tiare Lawrence told Hawaii News Now. "I don't know where my stepdad is.

"Everyone I know in Lahaina, their homes have burned down," Lawrence said.

Chrissy Lovitt told the outlet every boat in Lahaina Harbor had burned.

"It looks like something out of a movie, a war movie," Lovitt said. "The water was on fire from the fuel in the water."

Surf school manager Elizabeth Smith said she was safe in upcountry Kula, but was concerned for staff and their families in Lahaina.

"We do know that one couple was able to evacuate, but we don't know about the others," she told AFP by telephone.

"There's still very limited communication with people from Lahaina."

Winds up to 80 mph

Luke, the lieutenant governor, said the fires were caused by dry conditions and the powerful winds from Hurricane Dora, which is hundreds of miles south of the islands and is not expected to make landfall.

She said the fires have burned hundreds of acres and were being fanned by winds up to 80 miles (130 kilometers) per hour.

Ten [public schools](#) were closed Wednesday on Maui, and state officials and the American Red Cross opened emergency shelters for residents.

More than 14,000 people were without power on Maui, according to tracking website poweroutage.us.

Smith, the surf school manager, said a very dry summer appeared to be making the [fire](#) particularly widespread.

"I don't mean to be dramatic, but I don't think anything like that has ever happened to Maui," she said.

"It is unusual to have that many areas affected by fires, they're all over the island."

© 2023 AFP

Citation: Wind-whipped Hawaii wildfire razes town, deaths feared (2023, August 10) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-08-wind-whipped-hawaii-wildfire-razes-town.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--