



EAST-WEST
CENTER

Number 656 | Nov 08, 2023

ASIA PACIFIC BULLETIN

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Maui Wildfires: Opportunities and Lessons in Resiliency for the Pacific Region

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The August 2023 Maui Wildfires wrought catastrophic damage on Maui and revealed a range of tragic vulnerabilities facing the State of Hawai'i. A few early lessons from Hawai'i's experiences provide key insights for communities across the Indo-Pacific and should be harnessed to promote action to mitigate future disasters.

Takeaway #1: Issues are Compounding

Maui's tragedy demonstrates that communities and leaders across the Indo-Pacific must prepare for the new normal of extreme weather events. The aftermath of such events may include devastation akin to that experienced by the town of Lahaina on August 8, 2023.

In the case of Hawai'i, hot and dry hurricane-force winds, averaging 60-80 mph (26.8-35.7 m/s), facilitated the spread of fires in an environment suffering from severe drought and the overgrowth of flammable, invasive vegetation. For most Hawai'i residents, the fact that these powerful winds were caused by a hurricane that passed Hawai'i by over 400 miles was a shock.

Hawai'i must take bold steps to reduce its vulnerability to extreme weather. Native plant restoration and land management reforms, however grand, must feasibly occupy a central, essential part of any future risk reduction strategy. Furthermore, dedicated resource generation through creative revenue sources, like visitor green fees, will facilitate enhanced investment in land management and resiliency solutions.

The August 2023 wildfire disaster and other extreme weather events worldwide should serve as a wake-up call to the vulnerabilities across the Indo-Pacific region. Leaders must evaluate policy options to strengthen community resilience. How Hawaii responds to this challenge must serve as a model for others.

Takeaway #2: Make or Break Infrastructure

Pre-existing infrastructure vulnerabilities contributed to the disaster. It is clear that Maui's infrastructure was insufficient on multiple fronts. A review of vulnerable utility poles demonstrates how one infrastructure weakness can impact the trajectory of an entire disaster.

Downed utility poles are typically associated with loss of power. For Lahaina, however, utility poles also carried internet cables, TV, and telephone lines along Lahaina's main roadway. According to [information released from Hawaiian Electric](#), the state's largest utility company, toppled utility poles blocked evacuees. As a result, downed poles delayed response vehicles, hobbled communications, and sparked fires. When the integrity of utility poles failed, they temporarily brought down most of Lahaina's essential infrastructure.

To be clear, many of Hawai'i's utility poles are mid-20th-century products that were [built to now obsolete standards](#). In contrast, the Okinawa Electric Power Company (OKIDEN) uses concrete utility poles that resist winds of 134 mph (60 m/s)—much greater than those during the crisis.

Government culture is at least partially to blame for Hawaii's infrastructure vulnerabilities. The State currently has over \$3.6 billion in deferred maintenance costs alone, and the Hawai'i State Legislature has historically underinvested in state facilities and infrastructure. While Okinawa experiences a higher rate of natural disasters than Hawai'i, Hawai'i's geographical isolation means slower recovery times. Given these challenges, it is clear that local governments must mitigate the impact of disasters when they do occur.

Resilient infrastructure is a vital piece of this strategy. Indo-Pacific Island stakeholders in similar situations should prioritize infrastructure hardening efforts now to avoid future catastrophes.

Mr. Perry Arrasmith & Mr. Cameron Deptula, Special Assistants at the Office of the Governor for the State of Hawaii, explain that the tragic vulnerabilities revealed by the August 2023 Maui Wildfires can provide insights into disaster mitigation for communities across the Indo-Pacific.

Takeaway #3: The Risks of Geopolitics

The wildfire disaster's aftermath is taking shape against a backdrop of geopolitical tension among great powers across the Indo-Pacific Region. Hawai'i, as a regional linchpin for US interests, has received substantial support from the US federal government and military. However, Hawai'i's response efforts have also been threatened due to broader global tensions.

According to The New York Times, [organized efforts within China circulated unfounded theories online about military "lasers" causing the Maui wildfires](#). In West Maui, these theories dissuaded at least some displaced residents from seeking federal government assistance through FEMA or the State of Hawai'i.

A handful of US politicians threatened future congressional funding for Hawai'i's recovery over [disagreements on Ukraine's war effort](#). Russian-based social media campaigns have promoted this perspective, suggesting that [supporting Hawaii requires divesting US resources away from Ukraine](#).

Hawai'i's tragic natural disaster bears no connection to US-China relations or the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. However, actors at home and abroad have used the moment to advance their preferred foreign policy outcomes. Having Hawai'i's disaster response threatened by these actors is entirely unacceptable.

Indo-Pacific neighbors and island states should ready themselves for similar disinformation campaigns and geopolitical jockeying in the face of future disasters. Thus, response plans should include tailored messaging to combat similar misinformation and geopolitical challenges.

Takeaway #4: Opportunities for International Cooperation and Policy Alignment Including Subnational Cooperation

There has been incredible support and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific for perdurable approaches to future disaster mitigation. Hawai'i could benefit from working with like-minded Indo-Pacific partners to develop viable long-term solutions. Japan is an excellent candidate, and Hawai'i has many existing channels to fully pursue subnational opportunities for cooperation with Japan and other regional partners.

One such channel is the long-standing Hawai'i-Okinawa Partnership on Clean Energy, a partnership facilitated by the US Department of Energy and the Japanese Ministry of Trade, Economy, and Industry. The initiative is a relevant, official avenue for the State of Hawai'i and the Hawaiian Electric Company to learn best practices and receive technical advice from Okinawa prefecture and OKIDEN, whose electrical grid is hardened to mitigate heavy winds and storm damage. In addition, continuing unofficial dialogues with Japan's other utility providers, like the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), can provide Hawaii with significant learning opportunities based on the regulatory and liability issues they have recently faced as a result of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami.

Another opportunity includes Hawai'i's extensive network of [sister-state and sister-city relationships](#) across Japan. This historically underutilized channel is an excellent avenue to pursue collaboration on increased resilience and economic opportunities. As the recovery situation unfolds in the next few years, it is worthwhile to pay attention to how the State of Hawai'i leverages these subnational partnerships.

Conclusion

Hawai'i was, and still is, a safe place. The state seldom experiences catastrophic natural disasters. However, the compounding impacts of increased frequency of extreme weather events, aging infrastructure, inadequate land management, and a competitive geopolitical environment make Hawai'i's communities more vulnerable.

Hawai'i is in the initial stages of its recovery. However, these early lessons can be harnessed by our Indo-Pacific neighbors. The tragedy of the Maui Wildfire Disaster opens worthwhile opportunities for the Indo-Pacific region, as a whole, to explore greater cooperation, improve neglected problems in our communities, and confront these challenges head-on. The 2023 Maui Wildfire Disasters are a tragic warning for regional communities and provide learning opportunities to ensure that similar catastrophes are mitigated in the future.

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