

ISLAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE

ispiglobal.com · ISPIGlobal@proton.me · (808) 999-0544

COMMENTARY

After the Fire: Three Years On

What the Maui Wildfire Reveals About Emergency Management Policy for Island Communities

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Author: Warren Pulley, Founder & Executive Director

Institution: Island Security Policy Institute — Honolulu, Hawai'i

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Contact: ISPIGlobal@proton.me · (808) 999-0544 · ispiglobal.com

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On August 8, 2023, a wildfire driven by hurricane-force winds moved through Lahaina, Maui faster than the town could run.¹ More than 100 people died — the deadliest American wildfire in over a century. Three years later, ISPI examines what has changed in Hawaii's emergency management policy infrastructure — and what has not.

What the Fire Revealed

Mass notification architecture failure: The Wireless Emergency Alert system, cell tower infrastructure, and siren activation decision-making failed simultaneously — not as individual component failures, but as a systemic design failure in an architecture not built for simultaneous channel degradation.

Evacuation route capacity failure: The Honoapiilani Highway — Lahaina's primary and effectively only evacuation corridor — was blocked by the fire at the moment evacuation was most needed. Continental planning assumes dynamic rerouting options that island road networks do not provide.

Mutual aid timeline failure: The first significant mainland mutual aid resources reached Maui after the acute response phase had concluded. A mutual aid system designed for continental delivery timelines cannot provide meaningful acute-phase support to an island community 2,500 miles from the nearest staging area.

What Has Changed

Hawaii has made meaningful improvements to mass notification infrastructure since August 2023 — including expanded Wireless Emergency Alert coverage and siren network evaluation. Hawaii county governments have initiated emergency management plan revisions. These improvements are real and matter.²

What Has Not Changed

The structural conditions that produced the Lahaina outcome — road network constraints that make certain communities's evacuation route supply irreplaceable, supply chain vulnerability to extended port disruption, the absence of pre-positioned community reserves adequate for multi-week self-sufficiency — have not been addressed at a policy level commensurate with the risk they represent. Paper plans have been revised. The structural vulnerabilities those plans cannot address have not been.

ISPI Recommendations

1. Commission a systematic evaluation of all Hawaii coastal and wildland-urban interface communities for the three-factor vulnerability profile documented in Lahaina: limited evacuation routes, dry fuel adjacency, and inadequate warning infrastructure.
2. Mandate community-level emergency supply reserves across Hawaii counties adequate for 30-day self-sufficiency — not the 72-hour household preparedness standard that continental planning prescribes.
3. Integrate the Lahaina wildfire as a design scenario — not an outlier — in all Hawaii emergency management plan revisions.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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The Island Security Policy Institute (ISPI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in Honolulu, Hawaii. ISPI produces practitioner-led research, policy analysis, training programs, and commissioned research on public safety, emergency preparedness, insider threat, and security policy for island and coastal communities worldwide. ISPI is registered as a federal contractor on SAM.gov under NAICS 541720. Warren Pulley, Founder & Executive Director.

Website: ispiglobal.com · Email: ISPIGlobal@proton.me · Phone: (808) 999-0544 · LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/warpul13](https://www.linkedin.com/in/warpul13)

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